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IN THE SHADOW OF THOUGHT

Four ways of teaching literature

Renato Giaccaglia, professor

Walter Iannelli, critical lucidity

Alberto Ramponelli, affective intelligence

Andrés Curci, pure lyricism

They are all there.

Words, words, words...,

juggling, bats of

dark skulls.

RICARDO GÜIRALDES

PROLOGUE

I

The need to talk and comment on authors and literature in general grows as reading alternates with writing, both actually occurring simultaneously, feeding off each other. Serving as a model and a parameter. One writes the kind of literature one likes to read, whether for the subject matter or the style, but there are also those readings that one enjoys exploring and also criticizing. The pleasure is not only in reading what we like, but in discovering the errors of the same authors that we admire. Because there comes a time in the process of literary learning when each person realizes that there is no disappointment that can make admiration wane, but rather

the tacit acceptance that each writer is nothing more than a man who sometimes sees more than other men, that is why he writes, but often also sees less than them.

This, then, is part of writing, just as hate and love form the same framework in narrative and poetry, essays and drama, even and especially in anthropology or the humanistic sciences. I mean that the subject matter of literature is as varied and ambivalent as the resources that writers have at their disposal to develop it. The instruments are nothing more than techniques, and talent is as ephemeral and variable in its behavior as the weakest living being that can be imagined. The moment of writing represents a very strong link in the creative process, a link that nothing can break from now on when it has been achieved with the greatest art. How to capture that moment again, no one is able to say with certainty. There are professional writers, there are writers who write for the market, there are writers who write exclusively for themselves, and in all these variants there are good, bad and mediocre writers. The result is good or bad literature.

A great writer and a great teacher taught me from a very early age that there are only two categories: good or bad literature. It is a matter of time and principles to distinguish between the two in order to learn to write correctly, with skill and with soul. Style is a matter of time and practice, but above all of talent. You can learn to write, and even achieve a certain style that comes to resemble that of many others, but the true distinction is in the first sentence of any story, novel or poem. That intonation that tells us that we know the author, that even allows us to enter into a particular world created by a climate, a music of language, a knowing how to say things that define characters and situations with many or few words, but in a way that penetrates the reader's intellectuality until it gets into his heart. A conceptual poem can move us as much as a prose full of music and emotion. The raw and cold can move our feelings as much as the page of a nostalgic and romantic epic.

Homer's *Odyssey*, William Faulkner's *Absalom*, any poem by Alberto Girri, a novel by Eduardo Mallea or Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, to mention some examples that are paradigmatic for me, have in common quality and skill, effectiveness and sincerity, the intense depth of a fruitful search that has found a vein of gold in human emotion, using for this a technique matured with errors and triumphs in each page that has preceded it in time. If we talk about science fiction, for example, it is difficult to create the credible climate that scientific speculation requires, and it does not seem to me a valid resource to saturate the reader with scientific data to explain or excuse the author's ineffectiveness in creating his story. I think that the futuristic setting is just another setting to tell a story of men and women, with everything that they imply, obviously, conflicts, feelings, psyche and interpersonal relationships. Death and life, the mystery of why we are in this world, are always the same themes that

have not yet been resolved. That is why I like the literature of Ray Bradbury and James Ballard, even that of Roger Zelazny and Brian Aldiss with their exacerbated imagery that does not rule out poetry. Because language is the only thing that validates an author, in the end. Let us look at Juan Carlos Onetti, for example, where language delves into where the story seems too smooth to be real.

There are philosophical schools that are based on the interaction of man with nature as a fundamental basis, and it is not a conflictual relationship but almost a communion and a complicity. Curiosity for knowledge, unusual characteristics of resistance to certain elements of the environment, a strange and isolated temperament are the main characteristics of a good literary character.

## II

It is interesting how knowledge can lead to the feeling of omnipotence. Creating life is a temptation too attractive to be avoided, but the results are always partial, incomplete. And the incomplete in nature is related to monstrosity. The theme of a classic story, such as the multiple variations of the myth of Prometheus, more inspired in reality by Mary Shelley's character, are representative of the concerns that inspired literature in general: the concrete impossibility of going beyond what anatomy shows us. The great theme continually repeated is the search for proof, not only of the existence of life beyond death, but that what was once lived and seen can be experienced again. Recovering the past, childhood as a place where we were better and less guilty.

Knowledge does not always bring greater wisdom, because sometimes it plunges us into isolation, and makes us so skeptical, that recovering sensitivity towards those around us is a job that can become impossible. That is when the author must create situations of place and time, referential facts as evocative and nostalgic elements, not necessarily argumentative, but which invariably lead to emotionality.

Surrounded by people the characters do not know, an aura of strangeness seems to envelop them, heightened by the feeling of guilt that then arises, and they begin to believe that this can manifest itself organically. When it comes to this type of characters, the point of view can be that of only one, but alternating with other simultaneous points of view that enrich the understanding of the plot, and the time in which each one takes place is different. Both narratives converge in the same time and situation, as do the clues reluctantly offered throughout the text.

When it comes to fantastic narratives, we are annoyed by excessive descriptions and the usual rhetoric that this type of story can lead to if the

rhythm and tone are not controlled. All with the sole purpose of the insinuated mystery achieving its effect in the final revelation.

I think that there is no fantastic story that can withstand the passage of time if it does not have the elemental human factor, that is to say; the unpredictability of the thoughts and hearts of men. An automaton, for example, may not be created out of love or to prolong life, but out of hatred and to hasten the end of the life of someone we once loved, and among the many resources to be used, the first-person voice can lend ambiguity to a narrative that claims to be based on real events, that is, lend an apocryphal tone to a story.

Sometimes a climate, a person one has met, a fact that has impressed us, collaborate to promote the creation of a literary text, and yet none of these factors fully influences or survives as such, not even in its smallest fragments. They mix with the others and metamorphose. A name and certain characteristics of this real person, the urban environment and its overwhelming feeling of failure, the degradation caused by chronic diseases: all of this comes together to merge into the character and the climate, which in turn feed off each other. The result must be an attempt to capture the feelings and frustration that come with the impossibility of really knowing someone, everything that person hides from us and the resentment that it creates in us. The theme of the struggle with an illness, the soul-body dichotomy, although barely outlined, grows with the characters, and requires the author to explain more of their story, perhaps even indirectly, through other characters or found roles.

The psycho and socio-pathological characteristics of the characters, men or women with a certain maladjustment to their environment, may be based in part on a congenital or acquired psychic alteration, which offers a tendency towards violence, or at least a dissociation.

These are the two main things that make them feel the same way about the society in which they live. This back and forth journey of guilt and aggression, of misunderstandings and pain, generates a force that must be released at a certain moment. Of course, the intention is not to create clinical histories or medical reports, but to capture in literature profiles of men and women who move in a particular situation and circumstance.

The great works speak of guilt and responsibility, and one asks the following question: if there is no memory of the criminal act, is there guilt? Memory, then, is the main axis that makes the protagonists play a cruel game but no less true and inevitable than any other factor over which the human being has no control. The mind and time seem to conspire to attack the will and conscience of man, to sink him below the surface, which is nothing more than a fragile appearance of tranquility or well-being. Guilt, then, is another main theme of literature, as a result of meditations on

social and personal responsibility, what are the limits of both, those that society imposes and those that one imposes on oneself. The feeling of guilt is innate in human beings, the damage caused, even if it comes from circumstances and not directly from one's own actions, exerts its weight on the conscience. Logic explains, but does not alleviate the weight. Time, alone, has the virtue of alleviating, and even nullifying that feeling. The environment and the settings must have such an intimate relationship, that without them the essential feeling may never be transmitted to the reader.

Another everlasting theme in literature is the association of crime and loneliness. Different beings who feel relegated, sometimes need to subject the other to their own power, and since it was not given the impossibility of creating from nothing beings equal to our own ignominy, we decided to destroy. There is talk of crime and loneliness, of extreme pain and anger. Guilt has no place here, it does not participate, it is only related to the human condition in general and what it is capable of harboring and producing.

The cruel and the twisted, even the morbid, should always be attenuated to constitute good literature. The main thing, I think, is not to resort to effect but to appeal to the reader's emotions: the emotional must emerge from the words, from the phrase, from what is barely said in the right way. To shock without causing physical pain but rather an existential anguish in communion with what the character feels. In this way, he and the reader, and the author and the character, form a triangle of associations that does nothing more than reflect the common origin. Literature, like all art, is then responsible for reflecting it, exalting it, creating, when the writer's merits so achieve, a work that deserves to excite and resist the passage of time. I find it interesting to use a mythological being - and here I speak of myth as a synonym for symbol, as well as in the sense studied by Cesare Pavese in his lucid essay - and confront it with a realistic environment in which it is usually shown. The strange and the fantastic are in keeping with the hostile and at the same time peaceful environment of the countryside or the jungle, as in the stories of Horacio Quiroga, the darkness of the night confronted with the abysmal clarity of the day. Psychological work is essential to give ambiguity to a story, so that the fantastic is not forced or arbitrary. An alternative factor is necessary, then, for an apparently unhinged psyche, which sees strange forms and destructive monsters around it. Death has various forms, it presents itself, for each person, in a different way, even with concrete forms, not just modalities. For a character like this, finally, the fight is a defeat shouted out from the beginning. His derangement progresses along with his physical deterioration and his abandonment of himself, both represented by that last obsession, that of killing the monster that is stripping him of all his belongings, until finally taking his life. The hopeful vision that the author decides to grant him at the end is not a compensation for his suffering or remorse in life, but rather one more element of death, which as we have

already said, takes a concrete form, a literary resource that has as its purpose the identification of the reader with something concrete.

Literature, narrative more specifically, will only be effective when there are characters, situations, when a concrete story is told. Many digressions about death can be made, many philosophical theories, but an effective line is more than enough to provoke a shiver in the reader, a tear or even a pinch of sadness. An open, ambiguous ending can allow for various interpretations, but, as Borges says, it does not allow for any other possible ending.

### III

The following collection of reviews, comments and notes is an arbitrary selection that arose as a necessity I have the need to speak and say what I think about the authors discussed. The selection and the order in which they are arranged are arbitrary, and follow no criteria other than personal taste and chance, or determinism, in readings. I have often experienced these so-called coincidences, or causalities, where factors as cabalistic as dates were links that united authors and successive readings. Then, more than strangeness or uneasiness, I felt a kind of calm satisfaction, knowing that a certain, and unknown, order was being respected and slowly discovered. It would be interesting for the reader to make his own reading order, his intimate walk, without logic or congruence, other than that of elective affinities, making his own promenade sentimentale, to clarify, finally, that the reason for the title of the book is *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.

Many authors are missing, of course, the great majority of those I have read, especially those who have most influenced me as a writer and reader. But that was not the aim of this book, since that reality, that of talking and commenting on books that were read so long ago, has been accepted as someone accepts that one cannot go back in memory without suffering a bitter failure. What we were when we read them determined their appreciation, and rereading such texts would no longer be the same. If there were time..., I ask myself on many occasions, like someone who sighs in front of the enormity of texts that are yet to be read.

To live or to read, one asks oneself. Art or life. It is not my intention to elucidate this subject, but to put it once again on the written page, and each time that question is asked one is closer to the answer.

To read is to live, I think. Above all, one learns to live when one reads. I am not speaking of practical life, although reading also extends to this plane in countless cases, but of learning to live as human beings who are discovering themselves day by day. Looking in a mirror is a deceptive

thing, looking in the mirror of a literary character is, often and almost always, in the hands of a good author, looking at ourselves. How else to explain the tears that flow from us when reading, the lump in our throats and the slow recovery of strength that makes us sit for a long time with the book in our hands, closed on the last written page. A world in which we have been, people we have known and, perhaps, loved more than those next to us. This is the reality of dreams, and the fantasy of reality.

Art is not the ivory tower that practical and skeptical spirits proclaim, it is not the ephemeral entertainment for the summer by the sea. Art is the way in which someone sees the world and transmits it to each of his fellow men in the most faithful way possible, faithful to his vision, of course, faithful to his truth, which is very probably not the truth of many others. But that is the main, perhaps the only and most sublime virtue of art. Creating worlds seen through the particular eyes of a single man or woman, a single world that is added and coexists, that fights and survives, that does not allow the existence of others while the book is open, but that continues to exist in the emotional memory of the reader once that book has been closed.

When a book is opened, a world, whether we like it or not, begins to function. Even closed there it remains, even destroyed, that world has been imagined at some time. It exists in the multiple memories of human beings.

That wonder is called literature, and it is not from God, but from man.

## LIKE A FRENCH WINE OVERPOURED IN THE CELLAR

“Books do not immediately change the course of things, but they change in a given time.”

Honorè de Balzac

Honoré de Balzac

Cousin Bette (1846)

Balzac has a style that is based on certain constant characteristics in his novels. They are the ones that give him that peculiar character, as indefinable and ethereal as the water that escapes from the hands when we take it from a stream. Is Balzac a naturalist or an intimate, is he a realist or

a fanciful, is he a great writer or a great imitator? I believe that he brings together all these qualities and accepts many more, because he is almost a chameleon, an artist of the voice. His tone is always similar, but the resources he uses are so subtle that the reader hardly consciously notices, the attentive and studious reader of course, the way in which the author introduces us not into the characters but into our minds and bodies of those characters. His way of narrating has the following constants: 1) An apparently simple style, contemplating certain common places, a certain rhetoric typical of the time, but whose fluidity is continuous, overwhelming, as cinematic as Hemingway could be. 2) Disquisitions 3) A break with the conventional structure of the novel, incorporating sudden jumps in narrative time, in points of view and in the structure of the argument (see, for example, in *The Thirty-Year-Old Woman*, how the author is also a witness and the characters attend the theatre to see a play that has parallels with their own drama). 4) Above all and above all these qualities, there is an unbreakable argumentative solidity.

If we apply these points to the novel in question, we see how *Cousin Bette* reaches very high levels within the novel. From the beginning, we see that this novel is not only a small part of the world portrayed in *The Human Comedy*, it is also one of the two parts of a diptych called *The Poor Relatives*. Therefore, everything in it is part of something bigger, where the links are inexhaustible, where the reasons and the relationships are not and are not exhausted only in what the author has invented, but he leaves it to each one of us, his readers, to make the associations that our imagination is capable of creating. We will recreate it just as we recreate the world on a daily basis. We are characters but we are also gods of our own little world, which in turn is part of a larger one. So, any of us can be *Cousin Bette*, that bitter and resentful spinster whose revenge links the entire length of a 500-page novel. Sometimes in the foreground, other times lurking from secondary planes, but always responsible for the drama that affects the Hulot family. We are also Baron Hulot, inveterate womanizer, attractive man whose obsession lacks all grace to take on tragic tones. We are Baroness Adeline, a stolid fortress of virtue, from whom Balzac knew how to remove all attitude of gratuitous piety in order to inflict on her an attitude of supreme sacrifice and enormous tolerance. We are Madame Marneffe, the brilliant opportunist who takes advantage of the love of four men and deceives them into believing that the child she is expecting is theirs. The characters grow throughout the novel. Hulot ages and degrades physically and morally, Adeline grows morally, Madame Marneffe becomes a monster of great beauty, who will also be lost at the end in a suitable Balzacian allegory. *Cousin Bette* is transformed from a simple sad and lonely spinster into an avenger whose hatred seems to radiate through her. The fragment of the novel where Balzac describes the change in Bette after her association with Valeria Marneffe is one of the most precise and shocking from the point of view of the conception of man and woman: "...that kind of bloody nun, artfully framing in thick bands that dry, olive-skinned face in which shone eyes of a blackness that matched her



hair and asserting that inflexible figure. Lisbeth, like a virgin of Cranach or Van Eyck, or a Byzantine virgin out of the canvas... She was a block of granite, basalt or porphyry that walked." Finally Bette says of herself: "I began my life like a hungry goat and I end it like a lioness."

The end reserves one of those subtle twists of Balzac. The end seems to approach and unfold continuously, several times. There are several endings one after the other within this complex plot. When the villains seem to have paid for their sins, we resume the plot to recover the lost baron, and when it seems that everything will end well for this family, once again the drama only confirms its unwavering reasoning, its implacable logic. Cousin Bette will die, having enjoyed only a part of her revenge. She will die dissatisfied and resentful, as she lived her whole life, but the great paradox is that the memory that everyone will keep of her will be of a stolid virtue and loyalty, a mask that she knew how to properly sew onto her face, even in death, to consolidate her plans of destruction. There is also a secondary plot at the end, where old Madame Nourrisson is the instrument that Hulot Jr. uses to counteract Valeria Merneffe's plans. The poison of the tropics and this woman seem to constitute an indirect association, linked through the various planes where each of the characters moves, but none of this rules out the realistic logic of the facts. It is a pinch that enriches the enormous proportion of precious stones that enrich this novel. There are rubies and emeralds, there is gold and silver, but there is also the soft texture of marble and the crudeness of granite and basalt. It is a novel that never lets the reader's attention drop. 500 pages of mastery. 500 pages of a world from more than 170 years ago, which seem to have been written exactly today.

The House of the Cat Playing Hair(1830) La vendetta (1830) Gobseck (1830) Le ball de Sceaux (1830) Le colonel Chabert (1832) La bourse (1832)

These stories were written at the age of 31 and 33. Considering Balzac's previous long novel (Les chouans), he seems to have found stylistic maturity in his short narrative earlier. He would only need 1 more year to also demonstrate his achievements in the long novel in 1833 with Eugenie Grandet, and with Father Goriot in 1834. The stories we are now discussing are masterpieces in their style, and contain all the narrative skill, critical force and maturity in the gaze of the adult Balzac. The House of the Cat Playing Ball is a text that still surprises today's readers. Both in its theme and in the structural way of approaching his novels, Balzac was almost a chameleon. He probably experimented, and with this he paved the way for the modern novel. This story opens with a detailed description of a street, which is not unusual, but the description of this street and the business in question makes the place the main character, accentuated by the peculiarity presented in the title. It is a shop where the sign has a cat

playing ball, and the reader becomes involved in this little urban mystery until we gradually discover it. So much so that the true protagonists of the story seem to be almost secondary at the beginning, mere actors who gain the upper hand in the story as they drag it along, leading it by the hand with their dialogues and revealing it little by little. It is nothing more than the story of a shopkeeper who must leave his business to someone competent, and his best employee is not suitable to marry his daughter and become part of the family, at least in his opinion. This is the story, one more within the usual daily ambition of 19th century Paris to make a name for themselves and a future. But the plot of petty meanness and cruelty is nothing more than the simple fact of surviving in a society where money is everything and the petty bourgeoisie need their shop like the air they breathe. They will sacrifice everything for it, even their family. Only sometimes do feelings coincide with economic benefits. In *The Ball at Sceaux* we find ourselves in the aristocracy and in another similar struggle, but this time to find a good marriage partner for their daughters. In *Gobseck*, an exact and terrible picture is painted of a moneylender who will always make a profit, no matter how much those who turn to him think they can profit from it. The way in which Balzac describes these miserly characters is masterful, as he does with Elias Magus in other novels, who, despite their apparent poverty and enormous personal neglect of appearance and hygiene, possess extreme wealth which they use for the sole purpose of lending at disproportionate interest rates which their clients always end up accepting, and therein lies the pleasure of the whole question: having power over them is more important than honour, wealth and prestige in society: the power to sink them to the bottom of society as soon as they are careless. *Vendetta* is a text more attached to the romantic style, but its strength lies in its brevity. A rich girl falls in love with an outlawed soldier, who turns out to be a member of a family that murdered part of her own. The couple, unaware of this quarrel, encounters the refusal of her father, and this obstinacy will lead to tragedy in the Shakespearean style. However, the strength of the ending lies in the fact that there is no regret: the old man, despite his pain, will believe that his daughter was not killed by the stubborn hatred between families but by the member of the family his daughter married. *Colonel Chabert* is a text that is only a few years more mature, but the progress in the way of telling and the sharp criticism of society are evident. Because it is a short text, this criticism is subtly expressed, above all through humour and irony. A colonel, believed dead, returns after many years to claim his possessions: wife and property. He will first encounter sceptics, but what will be the definitive barrier is not the disbelief in his personality, but the vested interests that have formed around his death, now inconvenient for everyone. His wife has remarried and tries to dissuade him by trickery to deny his identity in order to leave her alone. This story is a way of contrasting different attitudes: moral honour (of which the military is one more form of expression) and the dishonour of vested interests around money; military life with all its glory and its poverty and the postponement

of duty to the soldier awarded with honours in times of peace; society based on good principles and manoeuvres and traps endorsed by justice. The quasi-speech that the lawyer gives at the end of the story is outstanding in terms of emotion and force. The story is not moralizing, but cruelly sincere, with that poetry of the ridiculous and the pathetic that makes Balzac a poet of the twisted things that are found beneath the elegant fabric of a suit or a society dress. The Bag is a less tragic tale, and can be considered a tale of customs, in the sense that it portrays a way of life of a sector of society. Here we have two women, mother and daughter, one a baroness and widow of a military man, the other single, both impoverished by the changes brought about after the Restoration, forced to survive without skills, with only their glorious family background and their delicate bourgeois education. The story is a masterful example of how ambiguity can be taken to the necessary limits without losing plausibility. The point of view is that of a painter who becomes acquainted with both and begins to suspect the strange customs of his neighbors. Despite being in love with the young woman, the almost complete proof that they have stolen his bag with his money forces him to accept the accusations that his friends make about these women as true. We have already seen that the tension is handled in this way: the mystery that surrounds these ladies and the vicissitudes of the main character's point of view. To this must be added the already mentioned intention of portraying certain hidden and shameful aspects of the time, and why not also, the almost revalorizing intention of women, who from the male point of view, if their life resources are not evident and clearly clean, are always suspected of ulterior motives and a vulgar and obscene way of life.

### The Chouans (1829)

This is a novel published when the author was 30 years old. We find, first of all, the skill and narrative fluidity characteristic of Balzac's talent; secondly, we discover certain idioms and rhetoric characteristic of the period that reveal the period in which Balzac found himself when he wrote it: a period of youth when he was still on the way to affirming, even though he had already found it, his own style. But perhaps we should be even less complacent, we will say that it is not a work of maturity, always in perspective, of course, of the heights he would reach later. It is not misleading to judge a work of youth based on merits that have not yet been reached and that would later eclipse some early works; it is simply to recognize later literary heights at their true value and therefore to calibrate the critical level with these levels in view. If we must criticize an immature work, we will do so because we know that Balzac later achieved greater merits, and we are no longer too concerned with that minor link in the path. The Chouans is set in a political environment and circumstance prior to Balzac's own life. It is, then, a historical novel. It attempts to

portray the civil war that followed the French Revolution. We are in 1799 and the Chouans, inhabitants of Brittany, are in a continuous struggle against the republicans to reestablish the king and religion. In the middle of this struggle there is a couple of lovers who each belong to different sides: she is a republican and he is a royalist. The problem is not the plot itself, even if it is trite even for the time. The author achieves an adequate balance between the episodes of war, the intimate scenes and the historical data. The issue is that it does not end up being a war novel because the battle scenes are merely descriptive and not crudely real (as one would expect from Balzac considering his description of the environments and relationships of society). Nor does it succeed in being a love novel, because the development of the characters practically does not exist, it is a simple rhetorical description of personal characteristics, without the reader being able to identify, or even become fond of, the characters. They are too stereotyped, without contrasting traits or psychological depth. Even the secondary characters, who usually serve as a relief in the tension by their humorous traits, here suffer from the same faults. As we mentioned before, there are idioms and remarks that the author himself cites as out of context, and the subtlety and sharp insight of his major works are conspicuous by their absence. The characters fall into stereotypes in accordance with the romantic novel of the 18th century. It is known that one of the most important influences on Balzac, literarily speaking, was Walter Scott. Here we notice that influence, for me disastrous in the sense of what Balzac was going to achieve later. Advancing in the novel we can find certain signs of audacity, for example the attitude of women as active members in the civil war, but even so the situations lack the force and therefore are victims of the implausibility that is always lurking when it comes to this type of novel.

He isThe romantic and adventurous style into which this novel falls, no matter how hard Balzac tries to avoid it, does not fit with his writing style or with his vision or conception of life and society. Balzac is a master at describing with irony (and therefore with slight traces of humor, completely absent in this novel) the cruel reality of the civilized world. His style is not in cape-and-sword adventures, but in the sharp psychological look (one hundred years before Freud) at human behavior and the relationship between men. No matter how hard he tries, this novel lacks these great merits.

#### Cousin Pons (1847)

This novel is part of a diptych called The Poor Relatives, always within The Human Comedy. It is a complement to Cousin Bette. If in the latter the whole plot of traps and manoeuvres is created and managed by a single person, who remains almost in the background for a large part of the work,

in *Cousin Pons* there are multiple characters who are in charge of weaving manoeuvres and traps to take advantage of a single character. If cousin Bette is the woman whose resentment turns into hatred, cousin Pons is almost a child whose naivety and trust make him a victim of others. After the character of the title is introduced, Pons's companion appears, the German Schmucke, perhaps one of Balzac's most endearing and poetic characters. He is a musician even more innocent than Pons, dependent on others and incapable of distrusting others. Only when he sees with his own eyes the evil of which Pons has been a victim, does he become disillusioned and lets himself die. These two curious characters, ridiculous at the beginning of the novel, naive and caricature-like, remind us of a later literary couple of men whose ridiculousness and extravagance will surpass them, although their story will remain unfinished; I am referring to Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pecuchet*. We could even make symmetries with other cinematic couples such as Laurel and Hardy. But the associations here must stop. The novel deviates towards a succession of characters that almost resembles a vaudeville. Characters whose role is absolutely secondary in their time of appearance but completely transcendent for their action in the network of vicissitudes that will determine Pons' destiny. At times there is an enumeration of references to books and works, criticisms of society less subtle than in other novels, which seem to turn the novel into a vaudeville of the present, but this is nothing more than part of the presentation of the scene. Even Pons disappears from the foreground at times to meet characters of whom Balzac makes long summaries and who will not reappear later. However, all this forms part of Balzac's enormous chess framework. Among these references and criticisms we find perhaps one of the best disquisitions in the author's entire work, the one that refers to astrology and palmistry. Balzac is assiduous to this type of essayistic inclusions in his texts, distancing him from the usual adventure novel where only the vicissitudes and adventures of the protagonists reigned. Therefore, at 47 years of age, he becomes a master in the almost perfect assembly of fiction and reality, of narrative and essay. Here, the criticism does not come from the characters, but the author is almost a narrator character who emerges as a witness to the story, a chronicler, which is confirmed in the beautifully subtle and gracefully sarcastic final sentence of the novel, where he asks the reader to forgive the mistakes of the copyist.

Returning to the story at hand, Pons is a mediocre musician and composer, but his collection of antiques is valued at almost a million francs. He knows this but he does not value his collection by money but by its quality. Nor do the others suspect it, because he has shown his museum of antiques to almost no one. Only when one of Balzac's typical Jewish moneylenders, himself a collector, comes across these masterpieces, does he realize their value, then the caretaker who looks after the friends sees the opportunity to make a profit.

The plot is chess-like. The characters take advantage of Pons' situation, now ill from the great displeasure caused by a misunderstanding by his closest cousin. The best thing about Balzac is that he lets his characters act and never assigns motives or classifies the reasons why they do what they do. All these people who want to take advantage of Pons's wealth are ordinary men and women who have behaved honestly in their daily lives, and have their preconceived ideas about right and wrong. Madame Cibot belongs to this group. There are also those who act by taking indirect advantage, not wanting to see their participation in Pons's death, like the doctor. There are those characters of the aristocracy who see in the sick relative an opportunity to gain. They are both in the middle of the world, and they are not afraid of the means to achieve it, and their hypocrisy becomes more evident the more profit they make. There are those parasites, like the lawyer and the notaries, who act between the parties and know how to take advantage of them. They all act only out of ambition and meanness. They do not want Pons to die, but if his death occurs, it will bring them many benefits. There are also those who kill without scruples, like Remonencq, for a woman and a fortune.

The only feeling that is valid in itself in the novel is the one that arises between Pons and Schmucke. They are both ugly, both have been rejected by women and are disenchanted with the life of relationships. They know that people are hypocritical, and they have the only certainty that one could not live without the other. They are absolute friends, and although their love has no sexual character, one has chosen the other out of complete conviction, without material interests, only for the satisfaction of knowing that one is valued and loved. The end of the novel is sad because of the death of Pons and his partner, but the successively ridiculous and sad, funny and ironic atmosphere makes this an enormous, essential novel of black humor, worthy of the best works of this genre of the 19th and 20th centuries.

#### Memoirs of Two Newlyweds (1842)

Here we read a 43-year-old Balzac, delving even more deeply into the female character. Balzac's predilection for studying the soul of women, of all ages and social classes, is evident. He is not afraid to delve into the meanest or most virtuous souls. As a great writer, he does not qualify but studies. In this case, in addition to carrying it out through another novelistic form, the epistolary, he must not only study the external acts of his protagonists, but above all the reflections, thoughts and feelings of these women. They are two young women raised in a convent, who at the age of majority are taken out into the world. One makes a marriage out of passion, the other out of convenience. Both will follow a parallel but absolutely opposite path: while one advances towards her peak, the other

declines irreversibly. The first marries without love, but this arrives with time and with children; the second exhausts the instances of passion and exacerbated love, risking everything, obtaining an early death, also due to untimely impulses. The great achievements of this novel are several. First of all, as we have already said, the narrative structure, where the letters retain their plausibility within their merely practical characteristics, but at the same time share a common base with literature; they are at the same time narratives and descriptions, subtly leading the reader through the vicissitudes of the plot and the development of the characters. A difficult, enormous task of assembly and skill, of narrative fluidity and narrative power. Then, we have the voices of the characters. It is a commonplace to say that Balzac's characters "live"; they are absolutely vivid in every sense, not only in the description made by the author, but when they speak directly. In the epistolary genre, the question of the first-person voice is essential, and the achievement is even greater. Each of the two protagonists, and even the secondary characters who make their presence felt with a couple or more letters, have their marked and defined characteristics. At the same time, the characters grow and the character of one is contrasted with that of the other not only by their own words, but by contrast, in a counterpoint that owes much to the music. The third aspect is that of the subject matter: women and their position in society. Women are seen as utilitarian objects, as a domestic animal at most, who must be educated according to the conveniences of each social scale, marry and maintain a certain position at the risk of being isolated and marked forever. The cycle of marriage and children is contrasted with that of marriage only for love or even singleness by choice. The reflections of these two women on their own role as women within the human species have not lost one iota of relevance. Their reflections confirm the sharpness of feminine thought, the absence of any utilitarianism that is only in function of a common goal, the capacity to manipulate men's feelings, the lucidity of guessing in them what they themselves know only by intuition.

The love-convenience counterpoint in marriage, whether a woman should be a mother to feel complete or can be one by developing other parts of her personality, passion and risk as methods of life versus serenity and calculation in each step of life. It would be interesting to make associations on these same aspects with the work of Doris Lessing, especially with the Martha Quest cycle. A century separates the reflections of both authors on the situation of women. In Balzac we find a Lessing is a masculine point of view, emphasizing an admiration for feminine lucidity that does not spare an exact look at its contradictions. She leaves aside the discriminatory and pejorative aspect to highlight the feminine abilities for survival within a society that is cruel to both men and women. The point is not centered on the socioeconomic aspect but on individual characteristics, supported by the generalities of the gender. In Lessing we find, first of all, a feminine point of view, which puts the accent on the social aspect of the condition of the woman. She does not speak of feminism but of the conditions with which today's society, theoretically freer than in the rigid law of

appearances of the Balzacian era, determines the position of the woman. Lessing's vision is both crude and accurate both about society and about the attitude of the woman herself. There is a psychological aspect immersed, hidden, within the predominant psychosocial aspect. The similarities between Balzac and Lessing in this respect can be seen in Martha's contradictions (*Martha Quest*) about her own desires, and the ambivalences and contrasts between Louise and Renata (*Memoirs of Two Newlyweds*), almost two absolutely opposite aspects of the same woman, which Balzac decided to separate in order to show these contradictions more didactically.

The end of the novel could sound stereotyped, even moralizing: those who live longer are the most moderate, and even love must be measured if we do not want it to kill us. However, there is also a moral of vindication: the woman who dies prematurely from her own passion has lived more in a short time than her friend will in the future. Balzac's language, his lyricism, especially notable in this novel, compensate for any commonplace that can be attributed to this work. The final scene, as in many other works by Balzac, is a high point in the novel. It is at once tragic, moving and contains a whole philosophy. In this scene, even the thoughtful and maternal Renata is frightened by the face of death in the corpse of her friend Luisa, and demands to see her three children, unmistakable signs of life, antidotes to the madness and terror that death provokes.

Modesta Mignon (1844) A First Step in Life (1842) Albert Savarus (1842)

These three novels show contrasts in their value and their result. The first is a masterpiece, the product of a 45-year-old Balzac in the full maturity of his talent. The other two (from the age of 43) are shorter novels and of much lesser value. Let us see why. In *Modesta Mignon* the subject of women in society is treated, as a general and underlying theme. A young lady from the provinces is protected by her relatives from all contact with the outside world and with men, both to avoid new misfortunes that the family has already experienced (economic and emotional) and to protect the fortune to which she is heir. With this plot line, we find ourselves in a kind of light comedy, at times, but as is usual with the author, this trivial plot serves as a pretext for a complicated argument that is transformed as the pages go by. The same structure accompanies these changes, breaking the traditional molds of exposition, climax and denouement. For example, we begin by going into the action, then the so-called summaries appear to explain previous events or descriptions of the characters, then the action or main scene is resumed (which is not entirely so either), to then move on to previous episodes and epistolary changes. The scene is finally resumed until it is completed and the action continues. When there seems to be a climax, both argumentative and emotional, due to the discovery of a certain



deception, the author presents us with another knot to untie, another conflict that the characters must resolve. The young lady falls in love with a poet and writes to him declaring her admiration. The poet does not deign to answer her, but his secretary does so, pretending to be him. In the second part, when the deception has been discovered, both suitors, plus a third, must compete for the conquest of the heiress. It is almost a play in two acts, but with the plot and precise, poetic and highly stylized language of a novel. It is common to see in Balzac a certain conservatism when he speaks of the position of women in society, placing them in their role as wife and mother. But the female characters are, perhaps, the most richly developed of the author. When he enters the minds and spirits of the women, he contradicts, with the lucidity, wit and malice of these female characters, the condescending opinion of the author within conventional social dogmas. The evolution of Modesta, then, is logical and surprising at the same time. At the beginning of the novel she is hardly mentioned, as a secondary character. Later she appears as a sequel to the novel. She is a shy and ignorant young lady. Then, with the letter, we see her intelligence and her self-taught nature, her daring and the mischief that is gradually revealed. In what would be the second part, she shows an aspect that could rival the most sublime cocottes, handling the emotions of her suitors at will. She is always in a balance between two abysses: the cloistered nun and the totally lost one. She seems to be attracted to both, and yet she never loses her charm between virginal and roguish. The male characters are sublimely described. The character of the poet, with his contrasts, is of astonishing certainty. The final hunt is another discovery and an evident allegory of society: the hunt for the deer is the hunt for the heiress courted by several men. But Balzac makes us wonder who catches whom, both in the social and personal sphere. The other two novels have the flaw of presenting excessively long and exhausting summaries. What works in *Mignon* as a long novel, here becomes routine and rhetorical. The language is mature and fluid, but flat and structured, without compensating for these deficiencies with poetic flights or emotional or psychological depth. The plots are also too complex for a short novel, presenting characters and summaries of them in succession, taking on a leading role that then dissolves to give way to another. This procedure, habitual in Balzac, is a stylistic mark that is appropriate for certain novels, longer in general, for certain plots and when accompanied by a more poetic and reflective language. These two novels, we could surmise, are only an aside from a prolific year within an already excessively prolific work. An author's irregularities do not have to be a discredit in themselves, but rather part of a personality and a conception of the world, of "his world", in this case *The Human Comedy*. Seen in their particular value, there are essential works, such as *Modesta Mignon*, and others that do not add more value to a literary peak such as this one.

The Bachelors

This is a series of three novels written at different times, and brought together in the final edition of *The Human Comedy* as a trilogy. All three share the thematic axis of characters whose bachelorhood, or rather the celibacy forced by this cause, has transformed them into beings of a mean nature, where ambition has replaced the absence of love or even the affection of others, and even evil appears surreptitiously, causing conflicts and tragedies to those around them. *Pierrette* (1840) tells the story of an orphan girl whose bachelor cousins adopt her for the property that is due to the girl by inheritance, and which they could dispose of by subjecting her to their will, making her a servant and causing her death, although not deliberate, but expected. The interest is not only economic, but also involves envy of beauty and goodness on the part of those who are deprived of them. These interesting elements are weakened, in part, by the procedure, very common in Balzac, of beginning with an action and interrupting it to make more or less long summaries, this time occupying almost a third of the novel, which is detrimental to the tension and understanding of the reader. Added to this is the fact that the personality of the old spinster is seen to be too stereotyped even in its type, lacking the relief and psychological development that we have seen for example in *Cousin Bette*. In all this, the language, essential to compensate for these characteristics of the Balzacian style, does not cooperate, being superficial and of average level, because we cannot speak of a truly "bad" language in Balzac. The treatment, then, is plain, without relief or psychological depth, not even psychosocial, as in other novels, where even the common themes (such as Beatrice) are enhanced or renewed by an elevated, poetic language, if necessary, philosophical or simply narrative but with more intense shades. The second story, *The Priest of Tours* (1832) tells the story of a village abbot being victim of the meanness of a spinster who wants to discredit him in favor of another, from whom he will obtain better benefits. The story is well told, beyond a certain explanatory tone and little psychological development, but it is an outline of what he would later deal with in *El primo Pons* in a masterful way. The theme is practically similar, where an elderly man, single, with a naivety bordering on clumsiness, is the victim of an ordinary woman, but whose meanness is revealed over time as she is tempted by ambitions she did not know before. The third story, *La Rabouilleuse* (1842), is a long novel that suffers the usual treatment in this type of novel by Balzac: the abrupt turn from one story to another, which will then be assembled in the end. However, this story is a very short story, but it is not a very short story, but a very short story. Fragmentation, which is in itself a particularly difficult point and at the same time a strong point of Balzac due to the masterful way in which he has applied it, works against him here, because the mediocre language does not help to tolerate the long summaries that expand on absolutely secondary themes that have no importance or relation to the rest. A relevant case where the same game provides relief is that of Beatrice, where the long history of Brittany creates a climate where the characters

and their psychology emerge spontaneously. The superficiality of the treatment is another point against it, where the action takes place without great contrasts or reliefs, wells and peaks granted by the characteristics of the characters, in this particular very stereotyped. The good brother and the bad brother, the mother who always gives her will to the bad son, the old bachelor urged by the beauty and youth of a servant who does with him what she wants in order to obtain his inheritance. These themes, in themselves trite, lose interesting and innovative tints, if they are not treated in an attractive way. In Balzac, when language and thought come together to create intense prose, revealing by what is not said dark areas of his characters, giving trivial actions a bloody intensity, they are able to survive the passage of time. In the case of these three stories, they are victims, I think, of an overly prolific author, whose economic motivations may often have influenced the depth, and therefore the quality, of the results.

#### Beatrix (1844)

Written between the ages of 39 and 45, Beatrice is not only another example of Balzac's multiple talent for adapting his novelistic technique according to theme or plot, but also clear evidence of the author's stylistic and poetic skill. It is divided into three parts, the first two published in succession, the third appearing two or three years later. The difference between the three is a clear indication of the progressive evolution of the characters, which is manifested in the language and style adopted by the author. Whether these changes in narrative treatment or language are changes unrelated to the plot and are due to the distance between the beginning and the end of the novel's production is of little interest, although the reader can somehow sense it. In any case, these changes genuinely represent the evolution of the main character, a teenager who admires the beauty and intelligence of a woman almost twenty years his senior, a writer who publishes under a male pseudonym. This first part, called "The Characters," is largely an extensive description of settings and characters, and includes the most poetic fragments of Balzac that I have ever read. The precision in the details is never tiring because it is tinged with a romantic atmosphere in the best sense, that is, not sentimental or rosy, but dark and tragic. The atmosphere of French Brittany is gloomy, and its torrid cliffs overlooking the rough sea are a not-so-subtle but magnificently poetic allegory of the drama to come. In the second part, called precisely "The Drama", there is an outline of tragedy that is not completed, and for that reason the drama remains almost hidden from the surface and the tragedy is part of the soul of the characters. The conflict is love and jealousy, the network of resentments and small revenges, the struggle between intelligence and love, between cynicism and the selfish remnants of past disappointments. The young man, victim of romantic love,

is now victim of his own impulses, and becomes a victimizer. The language accompanies the drama, subtly changing from poetic description to dialogues that do not pretend to be realistic either. There are fragments of letters and monologues that have the beauty of the best Shakespeare, and the music of the language elevates to great heights a plot that is not far from being common, and that in the hands of any other author would fall dangerously into the risk of the implausible and ridiculous. Here, the young man's evolution is accompanied by the evolution of the writer, whose life seems to have been reversed from that of others: first she learned about life through books, then she learned through experience. As a result, her soul learns from pain and redeems itself in many ways. In the third part, the language is clearly different. Although the atmosphere continues, it is more realistic and direct, and this is a result of what the characters have experienced: the disillusionment and pain of unrequited love. Beatriz reveals her hardened and vile soul. She takes revenge on the men who have abandoned her by leading her former young lover into adultery. She wants to ruin that marriage that she considers happy. The outcome is in a way happy. The marriage is saved, Beatriz returns to her husband, but the taste left by this long novel is very similar to what we see in real life when we are told episodes of a life over the years. The apparent incongruity of the facts is as valid as the treatment used to tell them. Technique and content complement each other. The similarity would kill the contrast and the merely realistic effect would not raise it above the mediocrity of other similar novels, if it were not for the poetic and almost illusory or distant language. The sea, the great protagonist in the first two parts, feeds the romantic spirit, which must necessarily be reduced to a sad skeleton at the expense of the plump and trivial realism that will appear later. For this reason, the terribly common and ordinary ending, the great tragedies and their beauty have not occurred. Romanticism has been defeated by cruel everyday triviality, and this novel is an exact, masterful, astonishing translation, I dare say, in the hands of an author, conscious or not of it, of the great paradox of the world and humanity: the dichotomy between reality and appearance, illusion and disenchantment. Hence the genius of Balzac, what he hints at is much more than what he says, you just have to know how to read between the lines of his apparently naive gaze, his irony and his fatal disenchantment.

A Double Family (1830) Peace at Home (1830) Madame Firmiani (1832) A Study of Woman (1830) The False Mistress (1841)

The first four stories mentioned were published between the ages of 31 and 33. They all share the excellence of their writing, despite the young age of their author, and as we have said before, his skill for the short story seems to have matured before that for the novel. Of course, the writing is excellent. The author knows how far to tell. It is true that we are faced with

a literature that could be called detailed, descriptive and realistic, all of this typical of the literary characteristics of the 19th century. But naturalism has not yet appeared, and psychological development anchored in genetic inheritance and influenced by the social environment are not dogmas as they would become in Zola, for example. Balzac experimented, using various narrative resources for his stories and novels. His descriptions are exact, both to give an idea of the setting and to characterize a character physically, intellectually and emotionally. Even the descriptions of places have more to do with the tone and atmosphere he wants to give to the novel or story, rather than for a simple aesthetic reason. For this, Balzac uses a complex but not difficult language, a language that few authors have achieved, that is, being sufficiently clear and visual, but not saying too much. That is why these short stories stand out for the austerity (always within the canons imposed by the florid literature of that century) in the data and clues that he offers the reader. In the novels this is not so noticeable, especially when he expands on summaries and parallel stories, but in these cases the achievement is based on other factors, the history and the evolutionary complexity of the characters, or the general structure of the text, for example. In these stories, brevity imposes other requirements, which Balzac understands as restraint, in avoiding obvious points that the reader must add on his own, as an incentive to complete the story. It is remarkable how this factor, essential in every good story, and which great storytellers of the 20th century have especially highlighted, can already be found in Balzac. Let us look at the stories. A Double Family tells the story of a man who maintains two homes, that of his lover, who is an honest woman who retains an unusual naivety, and that of his wife, repressed by a rigid and merciless religious education. The story can be described at this point as trite, but the author's treatment is exact and enjoyable. The story is divided into two parts. The first tells the story of the lover, keeping the man's past and his reasons for not marrying her in the dark. The second tells the story of the wife and the subsequent conflicts that lead the man to seek love elsewhere. The best thing about this story is the contrast between the women's personalities, almost a specialty of Balzac, a structure that we will see in several novels. The wife's rigidity and the lover's exquisite sensitivity are highlighted by each other. And the man's personality then receives the reader's sympathy, a certain pity, almost like that which must be felt towards a child placed in a situation that he does not know how to resolve. It is another common feature in Balzac, these male characters who start out as children and who, despite their growth, never manage to completely get rid of that feeling in front of women. The peace of the home is another example of a complex structure within a short story. We have a Parisian salon where several men gather to talk about a mysterious and very beautiful woman who is The woman sits without speaking to anyone. The women of society are there, and the story develops between conversations that try to inquire about the identity of this woman. Then a well-known soldier appears, with an austere and irritated personality. Bets and

challenges of pride follow between the men for the conquest of the unknown beauty. Finally, we learn that the woman is the wife of this soldier, and that on the advice of a woman experienced in the subtle handling of 19th century Parisian society, she has advised her to go to the party alone to take revenge for her husband's infidelities. The main couple, then, almost always remains in the background, and the secondary characters that make up the main plot revolve around them. This is the mastery of this story, the paradox and the twists that follow one after another and in different directions. The result, or the end, produces astonishment or a new look at something trivial and common, all thanks to the complexity of the structure. In *Madame Firmiani* we see another structure almost as complex as the other. It begins as almost a philosophical, social and psychological essay on "what is known" about a certain person. The compilation of points of view from different people and places within society is wonderful, which finally forms a personality that is more legend than reality. Then, we are ready to enter the story, as ignorant as the uncle of the young man who falls in love with Firmiani and who is said to have ruined his nephew's fortune. The man's interview with the lady, to demand explanations, does not remove certain doubts, but leaves him impressed by the woman's personality. Later, through a letter that the young man will read to the man, we will learn of her moral integrity, always more experienced, fallen into moral or amorous misfortunes, but for that reason wiser and capable of both self-denial and cruelty. Both characteristics typical of Balzac's female characters. In *A Study of Woman* we have a society woman who receives a love letter, but it turns out to have been addressed to her accidentally, (or perhaps deliberately), when it was intended for another. This short story is precisely a study of how a married woman from high society reacts to a potential lover: first she pretends to be indignant, then she receives the author of the letter with a certain coldness, but when she subtly begins to be willing to give in and surrender, the author only comes to apologize for the mistake. In *The False Mistress* we find a mature and experienced Balzac of 42 years. The story, of considerable length, has almost the structure of one of his novels, but the conciseness increases the intensity without being detrimental to the development of the characters. In reality, it is on them that the best of the story rests. It is the story of a love triangle: the husband's best friend falls in love with his wife. This love must be hidden out of fidelity to friendship. But the lover knows that the woman can succumb to his seduction if he confesses his love to her, so he invents a lover, whom he finally takes for real, without actually consummating the relationship. This noble and hidden conduct is highlighted by what is revealed towards the end, and which the author has kept hidden, not because it is not important, but for reasons of literary technique: the plot line goes through a certain character, and only through him will we see the characteristics of the others. This is how we know that his friend, the husband, has had relations with his false lover, and must therefore protect husband and wife from each other, her from any possible infidelity, and him from being known

about any slip that could endanger the marriage. Like a kind of guardian angel. Through this plot of individual emotions we learn about the customs, permissions and concessions, or hidden threats and possibilities that characterized each of the sexes at that time. The man could allow himself lovers without losing his dignity, and he won points with the others. On the contrary, the woman always had a weak point, the possibility of being seduced, and if such permission was granted, she had to submit to being pigeonholed in another plane of society. These stories are excellently plotted, told with an exquisite and austere sensitivity at the same time, raw and emotional at the same time.

#### The Clerks (1837) Another Study of Woman (1842)

Like other novels by Balzac that we have referred to in these comments, *The Clerks* can be placed within those dedicated to describing a particular sector of society, a determined social environment where we can find a representation of human behavior in general through particular characters. Balzac's genius makes this novel have descriptive and narrative fluidity, well-defined characters. The plot is complex but limited by the use of multiple characters that appear in succession, almost like in the collective films of Robert Altman. And as with this director -who curiously reminds us of his prolific work, his dedication to genre and auteur cinema simultaneously, and the deliberate attention to the anecdote set in certain places or certain jobs-, the achievement is varied. In both there are masterful results, and in the case of *The Clerks*, the result leaves much to be desired. The merits of narrative and technical efficiency mentioned are mere artifices or means of expression that in authors like Balzac constitute only the beginning and the base for any of his works. These instruments, of course, are taken for granted. But here the descriptive and critical function or objective, even though it is not pamphleteering or ideological, seems to stand out over the literary function. And this is not deliberate, I think, but rather it stands out by contrast with the emotional weakness of the characters. As always, Balzac describes them masterfully in their physical appearance, even in their habits and psychology, but here they lack, however, something that can unravel the grammatical technicalities in which they seem to be locked. The words in this case only manage to convey foolishness, and an austerity that only entails monotony. The coldness does not come from the characters, but from the treatment that is given to them. That is to say, they are characteristically human, that is unmistakable, but the description seems limited to a superficiality that simply aims to reveal social behavior, its causes and consequences. The pathos of certain ordinary characters, their failure and their subjugation by others, as for example in *Cousin Pons*, a work that has both socioeconomic and human characteristics, where both aspects are perfectly amalgamated, in the novel that we are dealing with now is only found as a mere

description that does not overcome the merely pictorial barriers (if we are talking about a landscape painting of limited talent, of course). A very different case is found in *Another Study of Woman*. Even though it is a work that is consciously made up of isolated anecdotes put together from various discarded fragments from other novels, the result is wonderful for achieving a language of intense narrative poetry and a human vision of extreme warmth and piety. It is about the usual meeting of aristocrats in a Paris salon, where we can find various characters already known from other novels. This characteristic is another merit, since we, as regular readers of Balzac, know something about them, they are like people we know who we can see clearly and feel a certain attachment to. Their speeches are not foreign to us, and whether we share their opinions or not, we know that they fit adequately into the knowledge we have of them. The conversation is about women in general, and three anecdotes follow one another in which three relationships are narrated. De Marsay tells the first, a story of female infidelity; Montriveau the second, a story of jealousy with a tragic ending; Dr. Bianchon, the third, an even more tragic and dark story, also about jealousy. What is peculiar about this *nouvelle* or long story is the extreme emotionality transmitted by the three discursive voices. Without departing from the Balzacian style, since all of its characters, with very slight grammatical peculiarities, have almost the same style as the author when speaking, there is an implicit emotionality in the poetry with which the protagonists tell their anecdotes. And this emotion is not sentimental, but full of control and overflow, simultaneously. Those who narrate know that they are in front of a demanding and critical audience, they must hide certain things and be cautious about what they are saying. And this self-control is transmitted with extreme effectiveness by Balzac. The feeling of deceived men, even if such deception is reciprocal, the vision of the woman as a divine entity and at the same time full of imperfections and baseness, the anger transformed into an uncontrollable feeling, to the point of creating a plan as well armed as that of the story told by Dr. Bianchon. In this novella there are two planes, the present, where the meeting takes place, and another plane that varies in time and space according to the stories told, and this variety, unified by the same theme, which goes beyond the differences between genders or a mere superficial description of women, is what makes this work one of the most beautiful short works by Balzac. It is worth highlighting Blondet's speech, which although it does not tell any particular story, is dedicated to describing what at that time was called the woman *comme il faut*, that is, the woman as she should be. Her speech is, without a doubt, one of the most successful fragments of all of Balzac's work, since it ignites the *poetic*, bitter and realistic philosophy of life and of women. Here is contained the thought of Balzac, devoid of all criticism and full of complete pity both towards that unknown entity that is every woman and her voluntary victim, selfish and weak, strong and melancholic, that is man. He asks her to declare her husband incapable. Here we find a diversity of types that make this novel an example of Balzac's genius. We have the



judge, old, good-natured and severe at the same time, of an incorruptibility beyond all doubt. We have the marquise with all her coldness and despotism, both characteristics hidden by the beauty and distinction of the nobility. The two characters are the two points between which we find the marquis in question, whose supposed eccentricities are nothing more than actions by which he tries to atone and pay the debts contracted by his father. Therefore, we first arrive at an initial conclusion, where the judge finds the marquis's reasons just and declares against the woman's claim. But then, the judge is removed from the case for puerile and arbitrary reasons, because in reality the word has spread that this first sentence would be handed down. What triumphs, then, is what was most probable in view of the influences and dependence of justice on the interests of the most wealthy. This novel is at the same time a terrible portrait of society in all times, a sharp and sharp look at the woman who has survived in such a society, and a declaration that nobility is not granted by money, but by honesty and a sense of humanity.

The marriage contract is an even more complex novel, where we are told how a rich, single young man is deceived by a woman and her daughter to marry her. The theme is not so simple: the mother-in-law and the wife have an ambivalence of feelings where ambition and a resentment born from the marriage contract, contrary to both, finally triumph. The novel can be divided into three sections without a solution of continuity, the central one being the very axis of the issue around which the other two revolve. The manoeuvres between the notaries to obtain advantages for their clients is the centre to which the reader is drawn as if it were a dizzying action scene, when in reality there is nothing more than dialogue, detailed movements and above all looks of all kinds, inquisitive, resentful, defiant or relieved. The way in which Balzac modifies attitudes and feelings based on the advantages or disadvantages of the contract is wonderful. The ending has a more poetic tone, necessary to get us out of so much sensation of practical coldness, of pettiness hidden behind decorous manners and lies told under the guise of a truth. Because the ending has as its protagonist the young man, who after being the victim of both women, must go in search of fortune to pay his debts. The pathetic thing is that this young man has always known, in reality, who he was getting into. However, his love prevailed over advantages and pettiness, a love that seemed to everyone to be a weakness of character and a naivety bordering on stupidity. But this character does not exhaust his wealth here. At first we have seen him intelligent, prudent, eager to found a family according to the canons foreseen by society and religion. He was not ambitious but neither was he wasteful of his fortune. His devotion to his fiancée showed more love than interest. His ruin, knowingly, shows him as a soul willing to sacrifice for his wife. But since until now he has believed in her fidelity, in her love, he was willing to sacrifice his money to her adorable whims. When the Count of Marsay, an unconditional friend, tells him the truth, the traps and infidelity of which he has been a victim, we find a defeated protagonist, facing his own naivety, as if his good feelings were an enemy

that has defeated him because he has always carried them with him without believing them to be an enemy. This novel is merciless, its criticism harsh, of high poetic and narrative rank.

The Atheist's Mass is a short story that tells how a surgeon, a non-believer, asks for and attends mass in honor of a beggar who helped him at the beginning of his career. This story is an example of Balzac's mastery of the short story. In a short space he determines the situation, story and outcome, all with precise, elegant language, where the metaphor is never too crude because it is adequately proportioned to what he wants to highlight. In this story, as in the novels, the ending is forceful, not condescending with any happy ending, but not sad by whim. It is a natural ending, where there has been no room for another, highlighted, confirmed, molded, perhaps, by the language, which reaches the precise and adequate emotional levels to confirm its forcefulness and its inevitability.

These novels are a great study of human society, containing lucid and bitter thoughts on marriage, on excessive ambition, hypocrisy, vested interests, corruption, and above all the cruel reality of human nature. Balzac is not condescending to either men or women.

A Daughter of Eve (1839) Honorine (1843) The Incapacitation (1836) The Marriage Contract (1835) The Atheist's Mass (1836)

The first four works, short novels, and the last, a short story, are among the best of Balzac's production. All these texts have the narrative skill, the sharp intuition of a lucid and critical, but also pious look at society in general, and the individual in particular, using for this purpose a language that is not only flexible, but also precise at the same time, and skilled in the use of a poetic tone that is not free of a certain crudeness. But as in Balzac's great works, what is not said is even more important than what is said, so the action creates a kind of hangover due to its intensity, a hangover that will manifest itself in all its significance when reaching the end. Let's look at the examples.

In A Daughter of Eve we have a society woman whose upbringing has been religious and severe. She has been married conveniently to an intelligent and worldly man. She falls in love with a writer with a very peculiar personality, unconcerned about everything that is considered fashionable, but accepted in the great world for his wit and intelligence. For her it is her first infidelity, which is nothing more than platonic, for him it is a conquest that she can boast about because she is a society woman. However, he also falls in love. Society encourages them in their relationship, but then condemns the same thing that it has encouraged. When he finds himself in financial trouble due to bad investments, she decides to help him, seeking loans behind her husband's back. When he finds out about the affair, he

takes a practical approach: he saves the situation by exposing both lovers to mutual shame. He has prevented both from falling into the worst, he has overcome economic problems, and he has saved his wife from dishonor. But what has also been prevented is a more sincere relationship, true passion and "what could have been," as valid as what happened, but disastrous or sublime depending on the point of view. Coldness and practicality, therefore, are the lubricants that make fashionable society work; everything else must be avoided, and if it cannot be, hidden. The personality of the writer must be highlighted, detailed in his external appearance as if he were Balzac himself, but whose internal characteristics include a whole species contrary to that of the deceived husband. The husband is practical, severe and without feelings, accustomed to maintaining the appearances of what society allows as valid. The lover, on the other hand, represents the losers, those who give more importance to sensitivity than to hypocrisy, but of course they are not able to survive the complex maneuvers of those who pull the strings of appearances and interests.

Honorina tells us the story of a man who has been abandoned by his wife, who is much younger than him. The entire novel is about the search and protection of this woman, who remains under the protection of her husband without knowing it. The curious thing is that when she finds out, an ambivalence of feelings disturbs her. She feels ashamed of what she did, abandoning him and having a child by another man, but she also feels a need to preserve her freedom, her will above all things. The integrity of men is not at stake here, since the protagonist is willing to make any sacrifice and forgive her so that she returns to his side. What this novel expresses is the need of women to preserve their individuality, even if this implies absolute solitude. Not hating men or their children, not considering them to be a kind of lesser evil that every woman must endure, even in spite of her own maternal needs and feelings. But a kind of individuality that must be protected at all costs, under penalty of being annihilated if she fails. This is what happens, finally, with this woman, she gives in, makes her husband happy, but very soon dies. This novel has, curiously, a similarity with a short novel by Doris Lessing, *Room 19*, where that same vague feeling of loneliness and self-destruction is present in the protagonist. I say curiously, because of the discovery of finding this parallelism in two writers who are apparently so dissimilar, which tells us and confirms, just in case we forget, that good literature is not a question of genres or times. Even the themes and situations are practically similar, leaving aside the clothes, the environment or the customs.

The incapacitation tells the story of a judge who is arrested by a woman of society and asks her to declare her husband incapable. Here we find a diversity of types that make this novel an example of Balzac's genius. We have the judge, old, good-natured and severe at the same time, of an incorruptibility beyond all doubt. We have the marquise with all her coldness and despotism, both characteristics hidden by the beauty and

distinction of the nobility. The two characters are the two points between which we find the marquis in question, whose supposed eccentricities are nothing more than actions by which he tries to atone and pay the debts contracted by his father. Therefore, we first arrive at an initial conclusion, where the judge finds the marquis's reasons just and declares against the woman's claim. But then, the judge is removed from the case for puerile and arbitrary reasons, because in reality the word has spread that this first sentence would be handed down. What triumphs, then, is what was most probable in view of the influences and dependence of justice on the interests of the most wealthy. This novel is at the same time a terrible portrait of society in all times, a sharp and sharp look at the woman who has survived in such a society, and a declaration that nobility is not granted by money, but by honesty and a sense of humanity.

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Some comments on the vastness of a work

Reading eight volumes of the cycle of The Human Comedy, according to the various editions in existence, means reading, for example, almost a thousand pages of each volume in double column, that is to say about eight thousand pages and double that if we consider a current standard format. 16,000 pages that paint a fresco, even if incomplete, of half a century of French life. Balzac's purpose was to recreate a world, to analyze attitudes and psychologisms, feelings, rules, customs, everything that determines the movements of human society in all possible areas. The vastness of this objective is too extensive, almost impossible if the author does not set limits to his pretension. The problem is that the more you write about a world, instead of shrinking due to satiety or completion, it expands, because knowledge, instead of satisfying, creates a greater hunger for knowledge, and characters are never isolated, but rather some lead us to knowledge of others. And so the places and characters multiply until they become innumerable and the situations tremendously complex and difficult to convey. There is no better methodology than the novel, I think, because essays and studies are too abstract and cold, even more limited than a cycle of novels. But even so, for a single author, perhaps the only way to transcribe a vision of that world, because the voice of many authors would cancel out the effectiveness and peculiarity of a particular voice, granted by the verisimilitude of a determined logic, the task is difficult. Therefore the results will end up being irregular. After reading a large part, I have come to find a regrettable repetition and similarity in Balzac's novels. This similarity is not in the plot specifically, even though the subject matter requires certain previously determined literary schemes - such as the fight for inheritances or love triangles - since the plots are very well developed

and the characters are at least interesting, and of course extremely well marked and delineated. The similarity that impoverishes the whole is in the tone and the resources. We have already pointed out that Balzac had the ability to change register with great ease, both in the voices of the characters and in the point of view. The narrative resources also have great variety: the first or third person, the chronicle, the intervention of the author, the stories around a meeting, the plots within the plots. However, there comes a time when the characters lose their brilliance and contrast due to the medium and repetitive tone. It must be said that compared to other authors, Balzac remains a master even in his less outstanding works, but compared to himself, which is inevitable given the magnitude of his work, we find an exhaustion masked by narrative fluidity, a kind of forced effort to continue something that did not necessarily need to be continued. It is, to put it more graphically, like a great building or a large old hotel, where we can find magnificent and large rooms, full of ancient and masterful splendor, but others smaller and cheaper, more isolated and somewhat dirty. Visiting the latter bores us, depresses us, but we are consoled by having visited the best ones shortly before. The historical novel was a particular interest of the author, but his achievements are those that have suffered the most damage and tarnishing with time. The character novels are the most successful, and yet there are certain emblems or milestones in all his work that cancel out the intentions of repetition in the rest. The generality of the complete work could be placed in these two groups. Novels such as *The Skin of an Onager*, *Eugene Grandet*, *Cousin Pons* and the wonderful *Cousin Bette*, the masterful *Beatrice*, perhaps the most successful both in the plot and in the exquisite literary language, *The Inquiry into the Absolute*, or *Cesar Birotteau*, which despite being within the group of novels dedicated to the socioeconomic sphere, is undoubtedly the most redeemable and successful of this type. And all this thanks to the fact that Balzac does not forget to rescue the psychic and sentimental intimacy of the characters within a cold social sphere. It is this contrast that determines the greatest achievement of Balzac's work, the intimate within the general, the human gesture and the mean or submissive, adorable or hateful, pious and noble face, as a representative entity, safeguard of what is truly remarkable and enduring. Not the vicissitudes and the mean maneuvers of power, the and the search for a position in society -characters like *Elias Magus*, for example, the greatest exponent, a masterful portrait achieved by Balzac-, but the sublime acts hidden behind doors, the relationships lacking any interest other than feeling and good will, -as in *Beatrice* or *El primo Pons*-, or the very fact of death, manifested as one more fact, above which others continue living, forgetting the dead and recreating the same behaviors that led them to their end, only that the next turn will be theirs, and deep down, even if the dazzle of passing things distracts them, they know it thoroughly.

Let us say that the best of Balzac is in his intelligent perception and transmission of the world that he decided to capture in written form, and not only, or necessarily, in his photographic or pictorial ability. Two

masterful examples of what we have just said are these two short texts: *The Marriage Contract* and *The Incapacitation*. The achievement is not in providing a novel for each commercial genre, as in César Birotteau or *The House of the Cat That Plays*, French or foreign region, as in *The Chouans* or *The Peasants*, artistic genre, as in *The Unknown Work of Art* or *The Elixir of Long Life*, but in giving life to each novel, whatever the theme or setting. For this, language is essential, and for this reason Beatriz takes the cake in terms of poetry of language. The philosophical disquisitions are not there as long monologues or interruptions in the action, but as natural moments of relaxation in the plot, of thoughts of high psycho-social philosophy that arise and are inserted spontaneously from and in the mind and spirit of the characters. These disquisitions are what give depth to the protagonists, since in the absence of an adequate psycho-clinical analysis, social philosophy is mixed with the particular feelings and the own vision of each character. Balzac's most successful characters are mainly women: see for example *Cousin Bette*, *Another Study of Woman*, *The Incapacitation*, *Beatrice*, *Memoirs of Two Newlyweds*, *The Thirty-Year-Old Woman*, but there are also sublimely portrayed male characters: *Gobseck*, *Cesar Birotteau*, *Cousin Pons*.

Returning to the works we are seeing today, *The Village Priest* is an example of the shortcomings we mentioned earlier. Balzac conveys history in a way that has not always tolerated the passage of time. His language in this type of historical drama is excessively attached to reality and the immediacy of the time he tries to portray, therefore, reality tends to saturate and sink the work in itself, which is literary and not a history manual. Something similar happens in *The Village Priest*, there is a diversity of arguments that seems to create a mystery that keeps the reader hanging for long pages, but this mystery becomes predictable and not at all original. Reality, once again, overwhelms us with its lack of originality, and the language, discreet but mediocre, tends to fulfil its role as a mere chronicler, without literary ambition. The fantastic in Balzac has its ups and downs, but in the best of his works it constitutes a kind of renewal of style and language. The peculiarity of Balzac's plots lies in his curious mixture of multiple arguments skilfully linked, in the ambivalence of the characters, and this same intelligent literary skill is applied in the arguments of his fantastic texts. The supernatural is not in reality, but in the multiple interpretation of simple and everyday events, in fatality, in the destiny from which the characters cannot escape. In *Melmoth Reconciled* we have a minor text within the totality of his work, but which provides a different vision, a complement, almost a vision of a fourth dimension within the *Stock Exchange* and the *Nucingen house*, two realistic and hard archetypes, closely attached to the real and naturalistic elements of Balzac's work. *A Passion in the Desert* is a small jewel that must be included in his short texts, where we can find many masterpieces, a fantastic, realistic and poetic story of the relationship between a man and a panther, which serves as a motive for a poetic and philosophical vision of human nature in general.

We can reach the conclusion, certainly arbitrary and subject to an opinion based on particular tastes, without ceasing to be an impartial although failed attempt at criticism that sets itself as its objective, and uses as its instrument, a detailed analysis and a vision that aims to be lucid, that a large part of the works that constitute this great saga of society are repetitions of a few novels and stories that stand out as masterpieces. The best of Balzac's work are those texts where he dissects the society of his time, or the one immediately preceding it. Like any work that attempts to encompass a complete world, it is doomed to failure. The only thing that is complete is the world that is attempted to be depicted, and even this changes. The author's aim is to systematically attempt to describe society based on a certain schematism that attempts to classify it into genres, segments, and paradigmatic characters. This entire plan is essential, of course, but it is doomed to be incomplete. Therefore, we find two types of failure. One is the exhaustion of the stories. Many of the novels and stories repeat a schematism of argument that is anchored in the very rhetoric of reality. Whatever the environment or social class that the author has chosen for this or that novel, the behavior of the men and women is limited to a couple or a few more attitudes and actions. This leads us to the psychological depth of the text being seriously threatened, as well as the mere external description of the characters. This leads, therefore, to language, the other point of failure, being limited, or self-limiting by its own exhaustion, both of stories as a source of nourishment and by the craft that leads to writing almost automatically. Thus, the poetry of language, which enriches the work and has the duty to compensate for shortcomings, such as that of the story itself, is absent, and it becomes a mere enumeration of descriptions, comments and rhetoric. Balzac's philosophy, when it is not profound or is not adequately inserted into the plot, becomes abstract and superficial. For this reason, and in a separate area, his journalistic articles fall into the same shortcoming: they are saturated with reality. Even though his opinions tend to be impartial or warn of their condition as mere personal opinions, the language is too anchored to a quasi-journalistic simplicity that keeps the analysis superficial. It is true that there are no low blows and good taste is predominant, that the observation is lucid and sharp, analytical, but it lacks emotional depth. Balzac's gaze is notable for its penetration into the cracks of society, the edge with which it cuts the veils of customs. Irony and poetry are two weapons that Balzac has used masterfully in his best texts. Works such as *Eugenie Grandet*, *Beatrice*, *The Skin of an Onager*, *The Inquiry into the Absolute*, *Cousin Bette*, *Cesar Birotteau*, are key points that represent trends and genres, beneath which there is a whole series of works, which do nothing more than repeat the original idea with certain variations. Some with more or less success, but without a doubt limiting the number of really good works to fifty percent less, being contemplative and generous. The magnitude of the greatest works is both in the excellence of the language and in the story told, ranges between which we can place various instruments that every author must have, a lucid vision, a capacity for



criticism, good taste to know how to give subtlety to his gaze, the ability of irony, which in turn requires a certain existential anguish and a maturity with which one is born, all this mixed with literary ability.

Patricia Highsmith

The Black House (1981)

While in *Once*, which includes stories written from the age of 24 to 69, she mainly explores the psychological universe of the characters, without asking why they act in such a way but simply showing these actions, in *The Black House*, which covers stories from the age of 57 to 60, she explores the relationships between people, family, friends, parents and children. The result is a psychosocial study of behaviors with the mastery of a great narrator, who does nothing more than show enough: the actions, dialogues and slight references to the thoughts and feelings of these protagonists. The plots are not fantastic, they only seem to be so at times because the language and the structure of the story reveal cracks where the mystery lies clearly, without this clarity diluting the uncertainty, what is not known, the feeling that something else is happening. Not everything is what it seems, and much less people. And above all the people we think we know. The characters in these stories are common, ordinary individuals, absolutely nondescript, they are even good and simple for their neighbors or friends. But even those with the best intentions can cause tragedies and produce the most intense pain in the souls of others. In *He Wasn't One of Us*, a group of friends isolates one of them because he is falling into mediocrity and depression, but these problems are the cause and consequence of these "understanding" friends. In *Under the Gaze of a Dark Angel* the protagonist is the victim of a scam, but without him wanting it, at least consciously, his victimizers fall one after the other. In *The Dream of Emma C* The presence of a young woman among the male crew of a fishing boat provokes an almost tribal and merciless struggle between male sexual instincts. In *Having Old People at Home* there is another more twisted war, and apparently more civilized, but no less bloody: two couples, one old and one young, fight to make their egos survive, until it almost becomes a fight for survival in today's urban society. In *I Despise Your Way of Living*, the generation gap between father and son is more than a social difference, because feelings are involved, and hatred can be proportionally intense to love. In *Wherever You Were*, the wife of a diplomat breaks the routine of her marriage with a failed plan, but which reveals a war between husband and wife that has only just begun. In *Ending Everything*, a young man with two girlfriends decides to end it all, pitting them against each other. Finally, in *The Black House*, this place serves as an excuse for an already

explicit allegory of the dark corners of human beings. So, these stories, masterfully written in themselves, perfect in their form and result, timeless both in what they say and in the meanings that lie beneath their lines, speak of human nature, mean, competitive, suspicious, selfish. The Kite, perhaps, is the most poetic story, although terrible in its ending, and yet it does not deviate from the same paths. In this story a boy, amidst his parents' arguments after the death of his sister, decides to make a very large kite with his sister's name on it. He flies the kite, the kite lifts him into the air and crashes him into a tree. The boy has reached his sister, it is true, but: has his sister guided him to lead him to heaven or to drag him with her? That is the ambivalence of human feelings and the factors related to those feelings, such is the ambiguity that Patricia Highsmith has set out to explore without misgivings and prejudices, only with the good taste and excellence of her narrative.

### Bestial Crimes (1975)

This collection of stories by the American writer was published when she was 54 years old. It shows an author in complete command of her craft, both in technique and narrative resources as well as in the maturity of the point of view and the treatment of the story told. We could speak of a limit for these stories, predetermined by the need to adjust to certain parameters: they must include animals, and some gruesome event related to them. Starting from this base, and adhering to these limits, we do not find any flaws that can be attributed to these thematic limitations. What is more, the author's skill surpasses the expected levels of intensity and quality that are common to this type of pigeonholed narrative. Those who write know that inspiration cannot adapt to previous patterns, to external pressures of both theme and style, at least when one intends to write with quality. For this, the only viable option is writing guided by its own parameters, its own strengths, when the author searches within himself for the deepest and most profound part of his character. When all this is in harmony with narrative and stylistic maturity, then great works emerge.

These stories, therefore, show a result that surpasses the original limitations and brings them together in a select collection of stories where simply, and by chance, the common theme is animals. That is, then, the result that every thematic collection must seek, not justification or evaluation by the original purpose, but by the individual result of each one, where each story is valuable in itself, and the wonder is renewed in each new story read.

These stories by Highsmith tell us about animals closely related to humans. For the most part, they are tragic stories, where animals are the victimizers of their owners, and also victims on their part. The point of view

is sometimes placed on the animal itself, not like a children's story, nor is it artificial or condescending. The animal thinks with certain considerations focused more on instinct and common sense logic than on a naive reasoning process. These animals are not innocent, they know they must survive, and even revenge is not seen with prejudice or an exacerbated feeling of hatred, but only as a fact that circumstances provide. Ambiguity prevails within the scope of motivations. We ask ourselves: do these animals act out of revenge and resentment, are they stupid, are they evil, are they cruel for no reason? The elephant in the first story kills her trainer for mistreatment, but she dies dreaming of her first trainer, the only one who understood her. A dog kills the friend of his deceased owner simply for snatching his owner's asthma machine, and he does not do it out of hatred but out of love. Self-defense. A pig kills its owner because he tries to prevent it from eating the truffles with which it wants to win a prize. We can cite several examples of these. Highsmith's animals never stop being animals, their reasoning is limited, they act on instinct and they never stop being cruel to those who are cruel to them. But at the same time all this is an allegory of human behavior. The men and women in these stories behave with greater bestiality than an animal, their incomprehension and narrow-mindedness is also greater than that of any animal.

There are stories where animals are secondary characters in the sense that they are nothing more than instruments that act around men, and show us, by contrast, the differences and similarities between the two, like a back-and-forth relationship, an identification common to both. For example, some hamsters are the instrument that a boy uses for the usual generational fight with his father. The tense relationship between father and son, dominator-dominated, even though it does not include physical or psychological violence, is taken to violent limits by the presence of these hamsters, whose naive image contrasts with their subsequent murderous behavior. Another example is the horse that a grandson wants to use to cause the death of his grandmother, from whom he wants to inherit the farm. The plan goes wrong and he dies, but the presumed happy ending for the grandmother only becomes apparent when she discovers the true objective of the one she loved. Some chickens, mistreated by the modern mechanistic system, participate in the death of the farmer, but at the same time are an indirect instrument of the wife, who takes advantage of this to get rid of her husband.

Are these animals vengeful, are they victims, do they behave better or worse than humans, do they perhaps perceive their true objectives or feelings, and being animals in close relationship with human society, are they perhaps as guilty as we are?

I believe that these stories imply all these alternatives and all those that any attentive reader can come to consider. Because good literature is not at the service of a moralizing objective, but of a plan without objectives, paradoxically. The objective of literature is to tell, and to think about what

is told. Then comes the rest, the enjoyment first, and later and inevitably, the multiple and successive reflections on the human condition in general.

### The Talented Mr. Ripley (1955)

Highsmith published this first novel with the character of Thomas Ripley at the age of 34. It remains, more than 50 years after its appearance, as one of the best novels written in the entire 20th century. The factors for this are multiple: its writing, its social connotations, its psychological characteristics. As it would later do in *That Sweet Evil*, the unique point of view is the predominant factor in the force that sustains and drives this novel. The psychopathic pathology of this character is evident, but the point of view chosen by the author, as a limited omniscient narrator, generates an ambiguity that takes root in the reader, and he or she ultimately thinks and feels, identifying with the protagonist. Whether he or she is a murderer or a saint is arbitrary and to a certain extent irrelevant. It only matters for the flow of the plot, for the linearity of the argument, but not for the commitment that the author forces the reader to make. One is caught by the exact, elegant but precise language, austere but with a poetics of the strange and the morbid within the realm of everyday life. Highsmith's characters do not stand out for their obvious madness or for bizarre gestures or actions. They are ordinary characters whose minds we gradually enter into. Their language is normal at first glance, their relationship with others is apparently normal. Then, his thoughts do not stray from the usual, but we discover small inconsistencies, which, because they are part of the same thought, do not stand out too much. But among these inconsistencies there is a factor of strangeness, something rather intuited, which in the end will be revealed with a violent act. Therefore, we have in our hands a character whose motives, whose secrets, are revealed, and even though they remain psychologically ambiguous, they are clear. Thomas Ripley stands out for his intelligence and his lucidity, another factor that adds to the complexity of his pathology, or rather that determines it.

The entire novel, then, like a great projection of his mind, is a treatise on identity. Ripley begins as a small-time swindler. He has no remorse, but he does have some scruples of hypocritical morality. He is easily capable of imitating identities, of carrying out subtle symbioses of which he convinces himself more than others. Their survival, their impunity, at times difficult to believe if we stick to what we assume of non-novelistic reality, is based as much on a kind of luck that favors him in his perseverance and intelligence. Ripley trusts only in himself, and even when he thinks he is about to be caught, the desperation is only internal, without letting it show on the outside. It is not strange, therefore, that at one point in the novel he says, for example: "I was alone and playing something for which solitude was

necessary." These two planes of his reality, no different from that of any human being, coincide with the idea of identities. Even the other characters take on relevance or relief when they are thought of by him. The clearest example is that of Richard Greenleaf. This character soon disappears from the novel, and those of us who have seen him directly are almost like having seen someone from afar, or having heard him in passing conversations. But when Ripley takes on his personality, he turns him into someone defined and with precise characteristics. Ripley is a chameleon, his own desires for economic progress and tranquility unite him with ordinary people. He loves art and aspires to see and appreciate the world. His sensitivity as a human being does not seem to be altered by dark thoughts or desires. The problem is that something is wrong with his morals; the barriers that stop us from certain acts in him do not work. So he kills, consciously, with greater or lesser annoyance, but always as a means to solve something. Like someone who does a cumbersome procedure, he kills.

Another important factor is sexual. Ripley shares the characteristics of other Highsmiths; his sexual ambiguity is a relevant factor for his immediate actions. Repressed homosexuality is, without a doubt, a drive directly related to his violent desires, attenuated by an exquisite sensitivity to the apparent and the superficial. Dressing and speaking in a certain way are essential instruments for his success, and this appreciation of subtlety and elegance is another element implicit in sexual ambiguity. There is a precedent mentioned in the novel, when it is said that his parents have drowned, and he is repulsed by water. We could relate this fact to the repulsion that Marge sometimes feels towards the watery nature and fluidity of women in relation to menstrual cycles. The attraction to Richard Greenleaf is not directly homosexual, even though it is suspected. She does not love him, she simply feels good with him, she wants to share time and places with her friend just as we all want to share things that we like, because sometimes it is not enough for us to enjoy them alone. The other is an extension of oneself. This is what she perhaps sees in Richard. When he distances himself, when he moves away, is when Ripley also distances herself from her feelings, and then she sees her friend simply as an obstacle, as a utilitarian factor.

The curious thing about Ripley is that his plans have the appearance of spontaneity, as if his ideas did not emerge until very shortly before being put into practice. From there, the apparent tranquility with which he acts, and the luck, which we mentioned before, may be nothing more than an accurate gift of intuition that he possesses.

Another interesting element is that of reality and fiction. If Ripley survives despair, it is because he creates a fictional world, where he is another or many, where he believes he can change without being discovered. A world that, however, fits with reality because it uses the same instruments and objects. His fiction moves within the everyday as if it were made of soft

surfaces covered in lubricant. Ripley sometimes slips away without knowing how he has managed it. This ambivalence of fiction and reality is also fueled by the point of view, of course, without which this illusion that sustains the character amidst so many dangers would not be possible, but also by the merits of language, which while remaining precise is at the same time impersonal. Finally, we must mention the strange affection that the reader comes to have for Ripley. His acts are execrable, we know it, as he knows it, but we suffer when he is in danger, and we hope that the acts help him to escape from those who want to catch him. This element, as we have already mentioned, is crucial to the novel's success, but it is still extraordinary if we think about it carefully. Ripley is just one of us. She does what we would all do if we were blessed with the same intelligence, skill and intuition. If we were also exempt from the emotional, cultural and moral barriers that stop us, placing guilt before us, an entity that for Ripley does not seem to have much importance.

#### The Spell of Elsie (1986)

This novel, whose original title is *Found in the Street*, published when the author was 65, is not in my opinion a completely successful work. Let's start by saying that its reading is carried away by the expected narrative skill, but there comes a moment when we ask ourselves: We see when the conflict begins. Almost half of it is an introduction of characters and situations that are clearly just that, an introduction, a preparation. We sense that something is hidden, that something is going to happen. We have a basic family, father, mother and daughter. He is a book illustrator, she works in an art gallery. They have a neighbor with pseudo-fascist tendencies who gets involved in their lives. There is a girl who exercises her charm on the couple and the neighbor. The original title refers to the wallet found on the street, and which the neighbor returns to its owner intact. It is also an allegory to the character of Elsie, a girl who has come to New York from her town and whom Linderman, the neighbor in question, wants to see as someone who must be rescued from all danger. The situation presented, the relationships of the characters, the implicit homosexuality between them, the unrequited loves, all these secrets are, after all, the secrets that everyone hides, even sometimes from themselves. All of this creates a highly promising situation. But the pages go by and the scenes follow one another without any contrasts, density or emotional intensity. Although the characters are intellectuals and their behavior is almost cold in their relationships, the author does not delve into their inner conflict, not even through their language. The only times she seems to do so, when she develops Linderman's personality, she stays in social pathologies and not psychological ones. The language, central to the management of this whole situation, does not stand out, it is somewhat flat, if not downright slow and distant, without commitment to the protagonists.

Maybe, we could call it "tiring"? From the beginning, there is a factor that anticipates these problems. The summaries, that is, the narration of previous events in the characters' lives, and which should be exposed as clues and indications of motivations for behaviors that we will later read, are long and even clumsy, forced and often unnecessary. The plot, then, seems very "stretched." The plausibility of Linderman's pathology, the only attempt to delve into darker and more literary-justified areas, is lost due to the contrast with the "reality" of the other protagonist, Sutherland. The altered point of view of a character is credible when that view becomes that of the reader, then the reader experiences what the character experiences. But if in the following chapter we see the concrete reality through another character, the emotional illusion disappears and the plot becomes a clinical history, a police report or a mere journalistic chronicle with the intention of a novel or melodrama. The plot of sexual attractions seems to take the foreground, but it is not enough to give an interest beyond a pretended social study or about the nature of the sexes. The introduction of Elsie's murder is neither surprising nor represents a turning point in the plot, from the point where it should constitute a hinge in the emotional aspect and in the course of the plot. The resolution, instead of having to do with the characters' inner conflicts, is directed towards revenge out of jealousy carried out by a less than secondary character, almost a literary scapegoat. Although Highsmith's treatment is austere and detached in style, the best of this style is not based on mere superficial narration, but on delving into the inner psyche, and this does not mean talking about her psychiatric pathologies, but on the motivations that her own behaviors denote. And for this, a language is needed that the author has been able to develop with great merit in many other novels and stories. Here, the result is poor, the treatment conventional and superficial, and it leaves us with the feeling of an author who is perhaps tired, repeating a formula anchored simply in her narrative skill, which is only the physical force of any intellectual machine.

#### That Sweet Evil (1960)

Published at the age of 39, this novel includes the motivations and concerns of almost all of her work, also sharing the skill and technical mastery of her writing. The author narrates in the third person, but always from the point of view of the protagonist. Taking into account that the character is what could be described as a psychopath, the truth and the lie of what happens to him are modified throughout the novel. But it is not a confusion for the reader but only for the character. Let's see.

From the beginning, the novel poses something strange. The protagonist has a peculiarity: he lives based on a certain personal "situation." Something that determines his thinking and action. But this approach to

anomalous behavior is diluted as it is explained, and therefore his behavior and reasoning end up gaining the reader's complicity, because they do not differ much from any other behavior. , his fantasies and impossible desires. David Kelsey, a professional chemist, apparently brilliant and intelligent, but not fully exploited by a lack of ambition that we will later see is intrinsically related to his pathology, becomes obsessed with a woman he has dated for a month and who later marries another man. The protagonist assumes that it was some kind of betrayal, even though there were no promises or real commitment on the part of the woman. In turn, he lives the weekdays in a boarding house, and on the weekends he says he spends them with his sick mother. But in reality his mother has died, and he spends those days alone in a house he has bought under another name for his fiancée, imagining that she lives there. The lies with which he deceives himself are still lies for him, that is, he is aware that things are not as he would like them to be, but at the same time that he insists on changing them through obsessive and ridiculous resources, he tries to console himself thinking that things have already changed, and for this he uses his imagination, the only means of consolation. He sends letters and visits the woman and her husband. He intimidates them through pressures that he does not stop describing as kind and polite. The logic with which they try to make him see reason does not coincide with his own. Little by little, then, the world and his life begin to crumble around him, without him being willing to realize the seriousness, like a sick person who has been given a deadline and who insists on saying that he will live forever. The consequences of this behavior, then, are tragic. Because violence makes its inevitable appearance when passions are at stake, and sanity disappears in the face of a total lack of response. He is responsible for the death of the woman's husband, even though he insists on telling himself that he had a different name when he did it. He is also responsible for the death of a girl who was in love with him. Both personalities under which he acts have committed a crime.

The whole novel is a long thesis on pathological behavior, but it is also a very well-woven allegory on human relationships. All these characters never agree on their feelings. The woman he loves does not love him, and he does not love the girl who has fallen in love with him. His best friend hates the woman he has married. And the protagonist's apparent good relations with his boarding house neighbors are based on false assumptions. Therefore, the author seems to tell us, the only peaceful and kind relationships are those maintained within the limits of lies. There is always a struggle whether it is in friendship, love, or simple companionship or neighborliness. The notion of identity is also called into question. We hate what we are most of the time, we want to change our name and way of life. And in these fantasies we include others, modifying them according to our imagination and desire. The novel tells us what the consequences of this desire to force reality can be. We will always hit a wall if we insist on this, and the wall will only hurt us, more definitively the more we insist.



David Kelsey, the protagonist, one can only feel pity, pain, hatred. But there will undoubtedly also be a kind of very faint and constant affection, based on the fact that his dreams, his deepest desires, are very similar to ours. Highsmith's language has her particular style, a mixture of dispassionate but not cold or distant narration, neither journalistic nor intimate, simply exact, elegant but not academic. It is a style that flows with the characters' actions, implicitly anchored in the psychologism that creeps in, not through direct references or reflections, but through a tenuous and almost imperceptible symbiosis between language and content. That, then, is the wonderful result that we call style. Highsmith does not write from a particular genre. The way she translates particularized masculine feelings into a determined personality is masterful. It is also commendable how she maintains the level of interest for more than 300 pages, through this very difficult resource, that is, the limited but changing point of view. Because what changes is not so much reality, but what David sees of reality. Slowly "truths" creep into his vision, things that he must accept and that mortify him, even though he denies their importance or transcendence. The reader, even though he sees through this distorted vision, realizes that the reality surrounding David is different from how he sees it, and many times one would like to shout at him, to warn him that he is making a mistake. But his path is like that of those antiheroes whom we must let go, resigning ourselves to seeing them destroy themselves, sharing their pain first, and then a terrible feeling of emptiness and futility.

What Highsmith tells us is not far from the psThe common pathology of contemporary man. We are not talking about genetic disorders or environmental or family causes, but simply about a man who has changed very slowly, who has managed to hide his altered and twisted inner world for a long time. But since we can never isolate ourselves from the external world, it affects us, forces us to get involved and then decides to eliminate us if we make a mistake, if we become someone who, like one of the old and nosy neighbours in the novel, can be described as "undesirable". An ugly word, polite but perhaps the cruelest word for anyone who claims to feel part of the human community.

The ending is another high point in this excellent novel. There would surely be no other ending, and the reader has been speculating that there are not many possible endings for this long journey of self-destruction. There is no alternative but voluntary death for the protagonist, and perhaps it is not even a death for him. Because his last thought is dedicated to that woman he dreamed of, much more beautiful and more deserving of his impossible love than the real one.

The Boy Who Followed Ripley (1980) Ripley's Underwater (1990) Ripley's Game (1993)

These three novels are Thomas Ripley's last appearances. All three are characterized by a failed foray into territories that are too well known, and which seem to be exhausted. The third novel in chronological order was published ten years after the second (each of them, in fact, except for the last, appeared within a ten-year period), and here a sixteen-year-old boy, with concerns and a dark past that make him similar to Ripley, follows Tom to his home in France. As much as he tries to hide his true reasons, he ends up confessing that he has killed his father and only trusts Ripley. From the beginning, the plausibility is forced, as much as the author's craft tries to conceal it. In the second novel, it was already a bit strange, considering Ripley's personality, that she had married and established herself as an ordinary citizen, while continuing to carry out certain fraudulent "jobs", but it is seen as a necessary change, as another adaptation of her chameleon-like characteristics. But there, the author's skill and psychological depth take the reins of her character, including in her very genesis a conflicting and allegorical imprint, also symbolist, without leaving aside a permanent action. In the third novel, there are repeated references to the two previous ones, which already begins to overwhelm. But it is above all a tone of sentimentality that spoils this novel. He is no longer just an ordinary citizen, who despite committing crimes and offences that he knows how to keep hidden, but also the author herself moves away from the ambiguous terrain of the character to fade his contrasts, to make him, perhaps, more human, but the result is contrary to the desired one: instead of making him more vulnerable and deeper, he becomes more artificial, more stiff, that is, he loses carnality and becomes like a character from a bad and superficial novel. The identification between man and boy, what one sees in the other, past and future, is not sufficiently developed, and remains on the surface. The action takes us to descriptions of Berlin and the political situation, then to a kidnapping that Ripley must resolve. If this situation that places Ripley in the place of the good guy were an ironic display of his skill and the twists of luck or justice, such an episode would be worthwhile. But it is not so. Ripley saves the boy and recovers the money, takes him home, and then the boy commits suicide out of remorse for having killed his father. Why the kidnapping, we wonder, if it was just to fill pages and prolong a rather hackneyed situation without contrasts or intensity. The recourse to suicide, again?, as in the previous novel. The brief incursions into Ripley's personal conflict, such as the sense of guilt, do not go beyond mere mention, and it is precisely this that differentiates the effective from the ineffective. In the other novels, especially in the first, the psychological and its manifestations are in the substance of the plot, there is no need to talk about them. From the moment that they need to be mentioned, it is because something in the plot does not work. Verisimilitude is one of them, a factor already very delicate in a character like Ripley, with all the disguises, voices and touches of luck that her plots involve. Another factor, as we said before, is the sentimental factor, which does not fit with this literary character. Because Ripley is not so much a "person", in whom all kinds of events can

be conceived, but a character, a creation where only certain aspects must prevail to be interesting and above all credible. Contrast is what makes art interesting, just like someone we just met. s we are interested in or not because of a certain facet of his personality that he showed us at that moment. The other aspect common to Ripley's novels is the hidden, unspoken homosexual element that is manifested here with the visit to a gay bar and the transvestite disguise that Ripley adopts to rescue the boy. But this, instead of insinuating something deeper or getting involved in a territory intuited in the two previous novels and whose development would renew the vision that one has of Ripley by digging into his soul, remains anecdotal and even humorous in the situation.

The fourth novel, *Ripley Under Water*, shows us the protagonist in his peaceful married home. First of all, and making a mention outside the plot, Ripley's wife is a totally secondary character, who does not fulfill any of the things that her presence in the second novel suggested. Here Ripley is threatened by an American couple who seem to know his past and intend to unmask it. The entire work is repetitive in terms of the conflict of the forged Derwatt paintings that was the central theme of the second novel. The repetitions add up to one another, making references to situations from the previous ones, which do nothing but show the attitude of condescension towards the publishing market, aimed at a passive and slow reader. If the five novels were a whole, a developed sample of the life of a singular character, these repetitions would be superfluous. The rest of the plot is an endless padding of dialogues that seem important because they are well written, but are inconsequential due to their same intra and intertextual rhetoric. Ripley's self-defensive posture only accentuates this attitude of a good man threatened, when what would be interesting would be to show the ambiguity, the cruel paradox of the murderer now victimized, with whom the reader can feel identified. But instead of this happening, the author shows us a one-level character, who has indeed committed aberrant acts, but whose repeated mention only manages to saturate the reader to the point of making them seem common and inconsequential. If that were the objective: to show how the most terrible things become everyday and lose importance, or the opposite, the crimes we have committed haunt us forever, it would be interesting, but that is not the impression that is conveyed to the reader. The language, then, becomes boring and heavy, where there are almost no transcendent actions, but a mere coming and going across Europe, and much less do we find psychological conflicts through a language to which Highsmith had accustomed us, that is, cruelty expressed with elegance, where the sentimental is as far removed from the facts as its depth and darkness suggest. The meaning of good and evil, the allegory of water in relation to his deepest fears, so implicit in Ripley's personality, has disappeared, and with it the effectiveness of these novels.

In the last one, *Ripley's Game*, Ripley's relationship with the mafia appears directly, which is another negative factor, because we have already seen

that what makes this character stand out above any other literary assassin is his tendency to individuality and concealment through a fictitious screen. For this, Ripley has previously demonstrated intelligence and elegance, which are far from the brutal and violent boasting of the mafia. The plot repeats references to the Derwatt-Tufts theme, which provokes a rejection in a demanding and mature reader, who does not want to be told the same thing again as if he were a first grader. The plot is capricious, inconsequential and lacking in originality, and does not crown or give a resolution adequate to the level of Thomas Ripley in the way he was presented in the first and excellent novel.

I prefer to stick with the end of the second, that masterful display of sagacity and narrative skill, where both impunity and punishment are possible, where Ripley contemplates both paths with the same fear or anxiety, planted for a second, barely, at the point that sums up his entire life, like two parallels that come together and merge for an instant to separate later forever: good and evil, truth and lies.

#### Ripley Underground (1970)

This is the second novel that stars the character of Thomas Ripley. The title in the Spanish edition is *Ripley's Mask*, which has both a general meaning, due to his ability to take on different personalities, and because of the end of the novel, where the uncertainty of unmasking constitutes the essence of the outcome. But the original title is in itself more intense, more specific to this novel, and even its meaning is more transcendent. I say this for several reasons. First, Ripley is physically attacked for the first time, a situation that forces him to remain buried alive for a few minutes. This is important, not just another episode in the novel, because it somehow introduces new factors to take into account: Ripley's physical vulnerability, and the deep symbolic sense of the earth as a substance of peace and tranquility, as opposed to that of water, which Ripley fears and whose consequences we will discuss later. Here the protagonist finds himself involved in a business of forging paintings. A second-rate painter has disappeared, supposedly committed suicide, and his name and growing prestige and value are exploited by his friends by making forgeries of new supposed paintings actually made by one of them, the closest one. At the same time, an American businessman arrives to cast doubt on the authenticity of the paintings. Ripley, then, is forced to kill him to defend himself, since he has passed himself off as the dead painter, and also to save the situation that involves all the others. We see here that, unlike in the previous novel, from 15 years earlier, Ripley is not alone. Although he kills to defend himself, he tries to convince the others, to whom he speaks of the murder, that he has done it for them. But here we find one of Ripley's psychological characteristics. In the previous novel, we saw how his actions are simple

natural consequences of peculiar situations, which he finds a natural way to resolve, that is, by eliminating the problem, without too many scruples of conscience, only the physical discomfort that murder causes, and sometimes an anxiety that he manages to get rid of soon, distracting himself, for example, with classical music. In this second novel, Ripley tells what he has done, hiding certain things and revealing others, according to the peculiar capacity for intuition and personality changes to which he owes his survival. Ripley is married, which seems strange in a character of this type, judging by the previous novel. However, the apparent rejection by women was not general, but by the protagonist of the previous one; here, instead, Heloise is a woman who shares with him a certain affinity for the strange and the secret, and even though he decides to tell her his things selectively, she accepts him as someone who sees a new adventure in her life. This mutual attraction gives Ripley a certain emotional stability, which also helps him survive the situations in which he is involved. In the case that interests us now, despite there being several people responsible for the fraud, it is he who takes charge and assumes responsibility for everything. He kills the American, and causes the suicide of the painter who makes the forgeries. This last murder is one of Highsmith's most successful scenes. Bernard decides not to paint any more forgeries, and even wants to confess the fraud to the authorities. Ripley tries to convince him otherwise, she wants to save him, in fact, because something makes him more akin to him than to the others. She finds in Bernard a talent equal to that of the dead painter, and decides to look for him to prevent him from committing suicide. But Bernard, depressed and upset, tries to kill him. He escapes, believing Ripley to be dead. When Ripley chases him through Europe and finds him several times, instead of speaking to him, he leaves. This supposed mercy and rescue mission is an ironic attitude of tremendous hypocrisy, of self-deception masterfully concocted by Highsmith. Because Bernard, stunned by his guilt, both the falsifications and by the supposed death of Ripley, whose presence he believes he sees everywhere, throws himself off a cliff. In this way, Ripley finds new ways to kill, but always with that parsimony and logical attitude that keeps him calm.

The ending is open, allowing Ripley to doubt his impunity before picking up the phone to receive news from the police, a doubt in keeping with the peculiar puns and complexities of the story he has invented, a story made up of both truths and lies. From there, perhaps, the luck that accompanies him. Ripley's attraction to Bernard makes one think of the one that united him to Richard Greenleaf in the previous novel, as well as the relationship between Derwatt, the dead painter, and Bernard. Homosexuality is psychologically implicit in these relationships, but always on a subconscious level, and from a human and not sexual point of view. The use of colors in this novel has a direct relationship with another common factor that unites both. The change of shades of blue in the paintings is one of the reasons why fraud is suspected, a change that the forger makes without realizing it, he says, but already under the influence of remorse. The

lavender color is the color of water, similar to the color of Heloise's eyes, an element that always gets Ripley into trouble (remember that Greenleaf's death occurs at sea). The theme of identity is also fundamental, starting with Ripley's skill in taking on various personalities, and especially in the matter of impersonation. of Derwatt by Bernard. At one point, when Bernard tries to explain his remorse and regret, he doesn't know if it's Derwatt who's really painting through him and the previous Bernard has already died, or if he's now Derwatt and Bernard has definitely died. It's also a direct symbolism that Bernard's corpse is used by Ripley to pass him off as Derwatt's.

But these and other less clear interpretations are always up to the reader, which we reach through the subtle clues that the author puts in our path. Clues that are such and are not. Elements that, planted throughout the two novels, give flowers of diverse meanings due to their multiple ramifications. The author's skill lies in knowing how to plant them in time and in a very subtle way, so that the reader - an attentive reader, of course - goes searching and extracting, like someone harvesting, meanings and significances. As a second novel, it has nothing to envy the first. While the former has a more complex, intelligent and original plot of its kind, more psychologically developed as a necessity for the presentation of this peculiar kind of murderer, the latter stands out for knowing how to continue with verisimilitude and skill in the same difficult line of balance between the entertaining and the profound. It is worth highlighting, as an almost independent achievement, the scenes of the last two chapters, full of a very bloody scene of physical and psychological persecution, death and subsequent cremation, transportation of human remains and the construction of a crude lie recited by Ripley as an actor, which is in essence, like every human being due to his ambiguity and ambivalence. His impunity is never assured in advance, as he is the first to recognize, he never underestimates the intelligence of others, that is why he triumphs. And curiously, we, readers who have followed his actions, like it that way.

Antonio Muñoz Molina

The Polish Rider (1991)

Published when the author was 35, it is both a book of memoirs and a fiction novel. The protagonist is also 35 years old when he narrates his life, the author's dedication makes references to familiar names like those mentioned in the novel, however the protagonist is not a writer but a simultaneous translator. A difficult path is the one chosen by Muñoz Molina to capture, almost to get rid of, as a kind of therapy, an enormous amount of personal memories nuanced with invented episodes that enhance the

endearing sum of memories. The author and the protagonist know that memories, however nostalgically beautiful and endearing they may be, are always painful for the simple fact of knowing that we will never be able to recover them. The only way to retain them is this, to write them down, and in doing so we relive every moment of the past. The past is the protagonist of this novel. The plot is as follows: a simultaneous translator recalls with his current lover, while they are in bed, the memories of their life in the small town of Mágina, Spain. Both have coincided after many years of separation, in having common memories of the same place. From here the disjointed and chaotic plot is unleashed, but linearly firm and contained, in the Proustian manner, of the memory converted into flesh and voices once again. Because the voices are the protagonists of the first part of the novel. The kingdom of the voices, as it is called, is a world in which the author has no choice but to enter in order to understand his present and tolerate or at least glimpse the impossibilities of the future. The voices will guide him, and that is why he allows them to appear and become beings of flesh and blood. Then, in the second part, comes the stage of adolescent memories and the intersection with the story of his lover, also indirectly related to Mágina. In the third part, the protagonist makes a pseudo-psycho-philosophical self-analysis of his life. As a common link, because sometimes a life is so disjointed that it can lose the thread of relationships, there is a secondary plot that comes from memory, an almost mystery of a crime that happened more than a hundred years before and that has stimulated the imagination and fear of the protagonist during his childhood.

Another characteristic of this excellent novel is the literary style, the technique used, familiar to those who have read Proust, but still different and peculiar. The automatism of memory is almost evident, but it is an automatism controlled by emotions and logic. Each memory has its purpose, it is not arbitrary or unnecessary at any time in the almost 600 pages. The paragraphs are made up of a single long sentence, where the music of language duly accompanies the reader. When we have become accustomed to this style, the reader is immediately drawn to the story. The author incorporates points in each paragraph, the sentences are long and dense, but they give us breathing room. The use of the first and third person singular is not arbitrary either. Sometimes the narration is in the third person, other times in the first person. We will learn, later in the plot, that the protagonist is not one but several because each man is different at each stage of his life. The adult remembers the child he was like someone who died a long time ago. The fact that the character is a translator accentuates the idea of voices and memory, we all have a mother tongue, but we must deny it and learn the others to value the first. The protagonist feels that he does not have a place of his own, he travels and his home is the hotels and the conferences. There is, then, an obvious and deliberate parallelism: home-individual / distances-voices.

The secondary themes are the stories of the characters of the town, but above all the changes that progress has sown in the world, and today's

society. Here is another parallel: the village, however much it has changed, contains the essence of the root of each man; the cities he visits are representatives of the continuous and inevitable changes. The distance is not only spatial, but also temporal. But the protagonist manages to shorten the distance of memory first, and then of space by returning to his village. He recovers an identity that he had lost and that had even made him think about the attraction of death. A beautiful allegory is that of the old photographer of the village, who has dedicated himself to portraying each of his contemporaries and has left hundreds of photographs that trigger the nostalgia of the protagonist.

It is also a love story, of that love that we would all like to experience, where the other is not someone else, but the exact complement of oneself. The entire third part contains beautifully written fragments of a brutal, not coarse eroticism, and this is due to the author's precise musical and poetic overflow. Beyond the fact that the narrative voice is a single, albeit split, voice, there is only one more character who narrates in the first person, and it is the lover and final partner of the protagonist. It is not arbitrary or speculative, but it coincides with the central idea: Manuel, the protagonist, finds that other woman who is also him, and with her comes the identity and the recovery of the home. So, that she takes the narrative voice at times is not capricious, but of a logic as tremendous as the sad truth of those photographs that they both see lying in bed: we are all dead, even before we are portrayed, and memory is, perhaps, the most vivid thing in the lives of men.

Antonio Di Benedetto

### Complete Stories

It is not something new to say that the literature of Antonio Di Benedetto is a kind of island not only within Argentine literature, but also within the world. Reading it for the first time is quite a shock for the premises that the reader of literature usually has. At first we are surprised by the strangeness that is almost his trademark, a strangeness formed by his stories, but above all by the method chosen to express them. The sentences are short, precise, austere in the details and descriptions. The author seems to disappear, and yet there is always a "style" that intervenes, a point of view that creates a tone, like a frosted glass through which we find it difficult but need to see. His fantasy is delirious at times, but always controlled. His phraseology is almost always indirect, not because it expresses the voice of the characters, but because of the grammatical construction, such as commas, subjects placed in the middle of sentences, strange and original comparisons. I will give some examples: The boy is



jumping two by two, pencil and paper in hand, the top piece of the ladder. Here we see several things: the distorted and indirect order of the predicate and its adjectives, interrupted by a note between commas, and also the fact of calling a part of the ladder a "piece." Another example: That darkened doorway to the street has taken Cecilia's dress. In this case an inanimate object takes on the features of a character, which is what is usually called animism, a common trait and well used by the author, because he does not abuse the effect. Finally: A pair of hands knocks at the open street door (same case as above). The woman obeys (the pair of hands). The husband is left demanding juice for the mate. It is a very appropriate style for tales and stories, for short stories. We will see later some reservations regarding this issue.

If we analyze his books of stories one by one we will see that this style was already present in 1953, when at the age of 31 he published his first book: *Animal World*. Here the theme is a kind of bestiary, but not in the Cortazarian or Borgesian way. There is no intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday, nor are they legends. In Di Benedetto's world there is no logic that can overcome the tests of reason, but there is a framework where men, animals, plants and objects are one and the same substance that changes its appearance. Nor is this the most surprising thing about the stories, because these amorphous elements could ruin the literary result, but rather the language as a guiding thread and centripetal force that holds the various factors of the stories together. The impression of the reader as of the writer is similar to that of someone who stands before an abyss that he cannot classify because he cannot see completely, but remains thinking, astonished, confused, trying to make various and strange associations.

Then come the *Cuentos claros* of 1957, at the age of 35. The first edition of these stories was entitled *Grot* (Grotesques), attempting a descriptive and unifying title. But the grotesqueness of the stories in the first book gives way here to a less grotesque and more profound and more everyday strangeness. That is why I call them "claros," because just as the language takes on more conventional forms (without losing those peculiar grammatical turns), the plots take on ordinary human beings, exploring traits in them that are only glimpsed on certain occasions. The lonely boy in "Enroscado" and his father are two tremendously well-defined and explored characters. This story has a certain Cortazarian tone, due to the characters, something also of Felisberto Hernández, due to the climate and the environment, but it is entirely Dibenedettian due to its narrative form and the cruel and at the same time merciful way of treating these two remnants of a family that will simply try not to live, but simply to survive without destroying themselves. The other stories in the book bring us closer to other less tragic tones, such as "As" and "God's Judgement", where superstitions and country customs are not an excuse for an anecdote but the very deterministic essence of the characters' attitudes. They, even

without intending to, can decree tragedies or happy endings, and they don't even seem to realise the narrow margin that marks the difference.

In 1958, the author published two stories under the title *Declination and Angel*. The first is a kind of study where, through the description and action of the objects in a matrimonial room, we learn about the dissolution of the couple. This seems to have been another of the literary and linguistic challenges of the author, fond of the experimental. The result is solid, exact, clear. In the long story that gives the book its title, we find one of the three main branches into which all his stories can be grouped. This belongs to the group of urban or family stories, which deal with couples' infidelity, the underlying guilt, and the forms that punishment takes. Here the son, Angel, who usually plays on the roofs of the house, is almost a sacrificial lamb for the atonement of the parents and the adults who surround him. The plot could be described as melodramatic, but the author's language distances it from any triviality or simplicity. The language, moreover, is practically photographic, and I dare say not cinematic. The points of view of the camera (reader-author) change, but the actions are described not by movements but by sequences. The form obtained is extraordinary and extremely peculiar. The result is pure literature, not a film script.

In 1961, at the age of 39, he published *El cariño de los tontos*, three stories. Two of them are from the group of country stories: *Caballo en el salitral*, perhaps one of the best stories in Spanish literature; and *The White Puma*, an open-ended hunt where the most important thing is yet to come: how to carry the treasured garment of the albino puma almost without help, and when the disasters and madness around seems to be a kind of punishment for the hunt. In *Horse...* we find the typical resource of the personification of objects and animals, but in this case it is a description that moves away from the simplistic language of the moral or the light story. The death of the horse, its tortures in the saltpeter and the final destination of its corpse, turn it into almost a Christian legend of death and resurrection, expressed without emphasis or rhetoric. Di Benedetto is very far from this, he tells, describes in the most accurate way possible, and the result is precise. The affection of fools takes up the urban family plot and the theme of infidelity, also that of children as victims, and the innocent but not defenseless point of view of the so-called "fools." In 1978, 17 years later and at the age of 56, he published his fifth book of short stories: *Absurdos*. Again the title tends to be more appreciative; the stories are very short, and there is almost no specific plot. There is a subtle and very tenuous thread that nevertheless has enough strength to unify the evolution of these texts. The common denominator of the stories is that they are accurate or original, and the stories are a natural evolution of all the aforementioned features. This evolution shows a more mature, more settled treatment, less concerned with the puns of style than with the ambition of the gaze. The fantastic stories, clear, ironic, grotesque, alternate with stories of a country setting (*Los reyunos*). We have the stories of animals and that mixture of bestiary that characterized his first book. There is a long, almost

unclassifiable story, *Onagros y hombre con renos*, where a hunt seems to be the gateway to a magical world of mythological animals. It is a story even stranger than others, delirious but beautifully written. It almost seems like a Tolkienian fantasy at times, without leaving aside the mythical atmosphere of Faulkner's forest stories. Aballay deserves a separate word. It is perhaps Di Benedetto's most perfect story. The questioning of the theme as almost absurd within a realistic plot and environment has no place, because the very absurdity of the approach (a man who decides to never get off his horse again in his life) is what turns the character into a legend. Here is where the story takes on heights and becomes almost a parable, a biblical episode. The end of the story only accentuates this objective: the man who wanted to atone for his guilt with self-punishment is forced to repeat the crime, but death, although welcome, reaches him in the least expected way.

In *Tales of Exile* from 1983, the stories are mostly short, with fantastic, realistic and anecdotal texts. One of the best is *In Search of the Lost Look*, which could be classified within science fiction close to the Bradbury style. To sum up, we can say that there are primarily three groups of stories or tales by the author: 1) Grotesque, characterized by the man-animal theme, metamorphosis and delirium; 2) Family or urban, dominated by infidelity, fatalities, and the child-guilt duo; 3) Country, traditions and superstitions, the environment and animals as characters as important as humans. As for language, it is necessary to say that practically all the stories are written in the present tense. This choice is not, of course, arbitrary. It is another element of the style with which the author writes. Short sentences and continuous actions require this type of narrative tense. The present is not always a strict reference to a current temporal present, but rather it is a way of narrating, a way of telling, like that of colloquial speech. What happened in the past, even if it was a long time ago, takes on validity, immediacy, in the present time. It is not an excuse for the writer to unravel clues little by little, it is a necessity of the text and of the story told. The originality of Di Benedetto's stories comes from both.

Another question is important. Are they stories or tales? A large part could be classified as tales, especially the short texts, based on the fact that there is no clear and linear structure of presentation, middle and end. The characters that appear at the beginning, even the plot that is presented as a conflict, are modified to leave the foreground to other characters and issues. In any case, the difference is subtle, even the unifying result, the revealing endings of the short texts show a very hidden story structure, sublimated to the magic of the stories.

The person who subscribes to these comments tried to read *Zama*, a novel from 1956, the author's first novel. The result was somewhat disappointing. Even taking into account the characteristics of his narrative: short, precise sentences, images and actions that hide something subliminal, like another story that the reader must follow beneath the superficial plot, this style is

dangerously saturating. Even some of the long stories have sections that slightly border on monotonous, and not because of the author's fault, or because they are poorly written, but because of the very characteristics of his style, which while constituting a virtue, can become a dead weight in long texts. There is an exhausting slowness, not because of excess but because of a continuous succession of sentences and paragraphs so short that they become enumerations. I wonder if Di Benedetto should not be read slowly, perhaps page by page, just as it seems to have been written. But would the result gain anything for the reader? I am not raising a question of literary merits, which are beyond discussion, but rather the debits and credits of a certain style in a certain novel, of youth, I might even venture. The Dibenedettian style is the style of the short story, it works perfectly for these narratives, but not necessarily in the rest of the genres. Changes must be made according to the plot, the best resources must be sought for each story.

Adolfo Perez Zelaschi

Suma XL (Poetic Work) ica 1938/1998)

This book brings together the poetic work of 60 years. Of course, it is highly praiseworthy just to write high-quality poetry over such a long period of time, and there are few authors, including many of great significance, who achieve this while maintaining at least a passable quality. Pérez Zelaschi is a writer born in Bolívar, province of Buenos Aires, who seems to have maintained an established place, never in the first row for transcendence or collective fame, but in a position earned by tireless literary work and a quiet and modest impression of himself. His language has managed to survive unscathed the cultural changes, the various genres in which he tried to prove himself, even the inevitable attachment of poetic discourse to the trivial or everyday so in vogue during the political changes in our country. Let us look at the segments in which the author gathered his poems.

The Sonnets open the book. Here we find a poetic form quite restricted to certain requirements of meter and rhyme, a risky form to be approached by 20th century authors. But it is clear that Zelaschi has grown up reading this type of poems, perhaps because of his Hispanic ancestry, and in addition to mastering the technique, in which he takes some liberties that do not clash and at the same time modernize, he creates poems of deep philosophical depth. He has an eye on the small things, on everyday objects, without unnecessary personalization or rhetoric. His gaze is simple but accurate, elegant but not mannered or baroque. He retains a certain subtlety that opens paths to more philosophical thoughts, without flaunting

ideas, only suggestions like a thoughtful and well-educated man who does not wish to convince but to converse. The sonnets span several decades, and although none can be discarded, the poorest are those from his twenties, and the last ones, more repetitive. If we talk about influences, or recognized or not kinship, it reminds us in a certain way of Borges' sonnets, for its subtlety and theme. There are even, both in sonnets and in free verse, poems that seem almost a response or a complement to Borges' poems of "the rose."

Then come the Songs, Romances and Ballads. This section contains poems again more limited by form, and here we must add the element of probable commission or recipient, or simply the need tending to an extra-literary object. In any case, although good in general and overcoming a certain mediocrity of so many other authors who have tried to approach the same forms, the result is still anecdotal, moderately passable, and I would dare say forgettable. The influence of Lorca and Miguel Hernández seems to be important in this case, but "in the manner of," and not on its own merits.

Then come the Elegies, and here the author reaches heights that surpass even the best sonnets. Once again we find ourselves with another poetic form with certain characteristics already established by centuries of use and tradition. However, its rules are less strict, its forms broader, and it has tolerated more changes over time than others. The elegy tolerates free verse very well, and many authors of various languages have appropriated it to create some of their best poems, from Rilke to Whitman, among many others. Here Zelaschi speaks of what he knows without limitations of space. We find the countryside landscape and childhood memories, the love of a couple, the lack of communication between bodies and souls, the destiny of man, the uncertainty of the afterlife, the mystery of God. The poems are rich in music, the images, although not completely original, are still moving in the context in which the author incorporates them. The ideas are not new: death, love, and destiny, but they sound renewed, they flow like water through the reader's mouth, because they are poems almost to be read aloud. The following fragment includes the Numbered Poems, and from the outset, it is the best and most highly poetic section of the entire work. Here there is no restriction of length, nor of grammatical, rhythmic or thematic forms. Only the need to be precise, austere in the use of words, not to fall into cheap blows and to be profound in the conception of the ideas that dominate the poems governs. All this is perfectly fulfilled. The same themes mentioned above are presented here, less related to the love of a couple, as happens in the Elegies, but more to the nature of man and his relationship with the knowledge of the world, his attitude towards death and the vague idea of the nature of God. It is curious how the deity is almost always mentioned with the word One. Memories predominate, and are the substance that breaks and expels the poems to the page. The idea of the end of life and the memories of what was done and not done are sometimes intolerable due to the inability to be able to repeat

Some are a form of consolation, others are a form of consolation. Zelaschi also uses poetic ideas that many other authors have also developed: Borges, Orozco, for example, the idea that opposites do not necessarily cancel each other out, but that they are both at the same time: light and shadow, for example, what happened and what did not happen. The probabilities and paths of life are in turn inevitable choices that rule out others forever, and yet those other discarded possibilities are also part of life, perhaps more than the supposedly real ones.

Rescate filial del memoria del padre is a series of mature poems that stand out for their melancholy and late beauty, but they seem more opaque compared to his major work.

The Odas libres are another exquisite part of the set of poems. Again, Zelaschi uses an ancient form that many twentieth-century authors have successfully tackled. It is a form that is suitable for dealing with epics and legends. Even the futurists adopted it to deal with themes related to the excesses of progress and the destiny of man as a race. Zelaschi's odes take similar topics. There is a legendary atmosphere that runs through these odes, neither rhetorical nor passé, but intimately related to the present, without being tendentious or referential. The language is epic in rhythm, not in words, the images are accurate, very visual, and remind one of Rilke or Buzzatti because of that smell of imminent tragedy, of sadness contained in heroes who are almost antiheroes. The odes also take local topics, others speak of the countryside, the mountains and the wind, and are clearly allegories of man in general.

The rhythmic Odes of the 1940s do not deserve attention, only as witnesses of learning and the influences of youth.

The Song of Remembrance and Enumeration of the Province of Buenos Aires, a work by an experienced author, does not, in my opinion, deserve to be remembered.

The Myths bring us back to the best of Zelaschi. Once again, the breath is epic, now to speak to us clearly with two allegorical poems that deal with the Beast kept in every man, in every warrior, and of a utopian city, which brings together all the possible good and bad characteristics, the city that is there and yet never existed. The Civics is a group of poems provoked, perhaps, by the part of every man who claims to be a member of a community, a city, a political system. Far from propaganda, the poems resort to ancient images and allegories, kings, jesters, princesses. But they do not saturate with this, they are just mentions that each reader will understand in his own way. The result is less tragic than the rest of his work, there is a humor close to irony that does not retain this characteristic as a label. The good thing about Zelaschi is that, the control he takes with his pen so as not to go beyond what is necessary, so as not to raise signs of

"I am like this and I think this." He makes poetry and measures his words so that the result is prudent and forceful at the same time.

The fragmentary Canto of Newpolis is the complete opposite of the Canto de Recuerdo de Buenos Aires, I refer to both its style, scope, point of view and final achievement. It is not an enumeration, in the first place, which is one of the shortcomings of the previous Canto, where the references are mere information without objective. In the different fragments of the Canto of Newpolis we get to know the different aspects of this mega city of the near future, but which could very well be any medium to large city in the current world. The author does not speak of a city in particular, and each reader could imagine the name of the one where he lives. Because more than being specific, the particularity only confirms the generality. Not of a city, let us understand, but of those who built it. The Canto has the almost epic atmosphere of the odes, with many ironic tones that accentuate the allegorical and at the same time critical character. It has the spirit of a great poem by Whitman, the same audacity of not being intimidated by the incorporation of words of a technological or everyday nature, simply uncommon in a poem. There are also characters in these cantos, no longer alter egos of the author, nor a witness or impersonal narrator, but characters who, in the manner of Edgar Lee Masters' Epitaphs, are part of a gallery of a place that represents all places. Mechanism, excessive progress in relation to spiritual evolution, the deliberate ignorance of piety, are the main themes of these enormous and beautiful prophetic cantos.

Finally we read the Cantos de Labrador y marinero, in a selection of poems from this youth book that the author himself made. These are verses from a man who was barely twenty years old, very rhetorical and in the style of Rafael Alberti, and not the best Alberti. We have already spoken on other occasions about how each poet has his own rhythm of growth and maturity. Zelaschi is a prolific author who has needed to mature many texts, so his growth has continued well into his older years. But let us make it clear that even in his less relevant, more immature poems, he retains a dignity that rescues these minor texts from any qualification of mediocrity. Finally, in Las últimas there are a few poems that have in common with his best period only the experienced language, but the theme and the chosen form are repeated to the point of being superfluous within the entire poetic work. It is not a swan song, but rather a few sketches that try to affirm, to say again what has already been said before with enormous talent and effectiveness.

EL TIEMPO HUELE L'CARNE RANCIA

"Les vrais livres doivent être les enfants non du grand jour et de la causerie, mais de l'obscurité et du silence."

Marcel Proust

Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre (1848)

Is there a gender difference in literature? I think there are different points of view, which do not always coincide with the sex of the person writing. There are women authors whose violence contrasts with what is usually expected of them, delicacy and subtlety. There are men whose primary gaze is based on melancholy and passivity, different from the raw experience and hard integrity of male nature. That is why the contribution of the female gaze is not based on form but on the point of view. And this does not have to be higher or lower, nor more or less distant, nor more comprehensive or more intimate. I think that the contribution of each author is in his or her personal experience, whether it comes from a man or a woman. The difference, perhaps, is in who reads it. A female reader may see certain common features in the female gaze of an author, which she probably did not intend to express, but which are implicit there. But this always happens to every good reader, he recreates the text, that is, he creates it again, and the result is something else, something formed in the limbo of consciousness: an idea that became a written word and that has become an idea again.

What differentiates Jane Eyre from other novels written by women is that it is a typical product of a certain time and cultural formation: the suburban middle class of a province in the English countryside. Religious but not fanatic, conservative but not restricted. The role of women is determined by certain limits, but that does not mean that behind closed doors they cannot access books and the freedom that education offers them. Charlotte was perhaps the most talented of the three sisters, but Emily has nothing to envy her sister with her *Wuthering Heights*. Jane Eyre stands out not so much for the gothic setting (although never too dark) or the tortured and tragic characters, but for the extreme intelligence of the author. Narrated in the first person, the protagonist is never confused with the author. The character is clearly defined, and evolves through the lucid and logical gaze of the protagonist herself. The development is almost a psychosocial analysis of a character, not so much for the search for causes and effects, but for the extreme rationalization of the steps followed in her life. There is a continuous control of what is narrated, there are never hesitant movements when telling, and the firmness of the character is a symbol of the narrative structure. The dialogues between Jane and Rochester are a



game of cold and cruel irony at times, an exchange of words that almost borders on the sharp, and yet neither of them feels offended, nor doubts that the other will understand what they wanted to say, even if it was not explicit. And in that interrelation there is an eroticism that breaks with all preconceptions. In the same impossibility of two lovers who desperately want to caress each other and cannot do so due to cultural conventions or personal repressions, it is manifested in the words that come out of their mouths. The words caress and hurt at the same time. The plot is very well woven, solidly anchored in the clarity of the characters, and only in the final third, when Jane, after three days of wandering and hungry, finds refuge rightly and unwittingly in the house of her unknown cousins, does it seem to border on the forced. But that does not detract from the novel.

The ending is one of the few happy endings where it is a natural result of the plot. It is a result that comes from many more losses than gains, but this confirms that Jane and Rochester are not unusual characters.

Happiness or unhappiness are transitory, and their duration is in the way that the nature of a man or woman decides to face them.

Angel Bonomini

Beyond the Bridge (1996)

The author's last book of short stories, it was published posthumously two years after his death in 1994. Bonomini became distinctive and stood out for his mastery of the short story and the narrative. In total he published six books. The author's most famous short story collection, which spans from 1972 to the present one. Its narrative characteristics are good, precise and poetic language, clear mastery of the story technique and its peculiar structure, plots and atmosphere always close to allegory, which never falls into common or trite places, much less into bad taste. Even though its themes, especially in this book, are not original, for example: the theme of the double, the use of the dreamlike as a splitting of reality, they never cease to be worthy examples of how these themes should be treated, that is, with a touch of originality that demonstrates the author's style. If we talk about *The Tenant*, we will see that many authors have treated the theme of the double in this same way, from Bradbury to Orgambide, and yet in its concise and exact way of narrating, this story is new and shocking in its almost unexpected ending. In *Marta* and *Camila* we have another example of the theme of the double, and the emphasis is not so much on the surprising, nor does it seek the fantastic fact as a primary resource, but on the drama and melancholy that arises from the situation of these characters. The allegory, therefore, does not come from the symbol represented by the supernatural event, but is a natural consequence of the

character's psychology. Dream or not, reality or fantasy, the character is living another form of life, which is imposed on him and he cannot choose. The author does not gloat over making his characters suffer, nor do they feel the drama as something unbearable or incompatible with life, the situation is part of themselves as living beings. Sleep is not a state apart from life, it is between the folds of wakefulness, those folds that we overlook because we do not bother to look down or to the sides. The Messenger is another Bradbury-themed story that is in no way inferior in Bonomini's hands. In this case, the protagonist is a being that carries the signs of a plague from one town to another. It is a timeless story with no predetermined space, reminiscent of medieval tales or those legends from Eastern Europe. Childhood's End is more local, and addresses the tragic theme of a child's death in an exquisitely elegant way, without mentioning it, only hinting at the inevitable, and yet the language remains close and intimate. It is an admirable example of how the first-person narrative voice can have local and even crude twists within a precise style, dominated by the discreet elegance of the austere and emotionally fair. The same parity is found in stories such as A Museum Piece and Last Chapters of My Memoirs, where the barriers between fiction (pictorial and literary, respectively) and reality are completely broken and the transition between one and the other is clear and without conflict. I think that Bonomini is one of the best Argentine narrators and storytellers. His style, related to Cortázar, in my opinion seems to present fewer ups and downs than that of the master, obviously saving the distances in terms of the achievements obtained and the rupture of the conventional that characterized Cortázar. The fantastic in Bonomini is linked to the use of allegory in a way similar to that cultivated by authors such as Buzzati, Kafka or Schulz. Although less concerned with the environment itself, what is peculiar in Bonomini is this lack of limits between what is and what is not. Reality has as much or more value than what we dream. Ambiguity is not a flaw or a defect, nor an exception to the everyday, but an implicit and substantial characteristic of the very concept of reality.

Bruno Schulz

The street of crocodiles (anthology)

The author published only two books of short stories: Las tiendas de color canela and El sanatorio del sepulturero. This is an anthology that brings together a large part of these stories. This author, who was born and lived in Middle Eastern Europe, during a particularly turbulent period (the Second World War), devoted himself to painting and literature, and in both he has achieved surprising means of expression. His literature, in this case,

is tinged and related to his colleague Franz Kafka, and with him he shares a vision of the world that is both tragic and absurd. However, the similarities end there, in my opinion. The author of the prologue to the anthology, Elvio Gandolfo, mentions the similarity in the importance of the paternal figure, and although he highlights the differences between both parents, I think that the influence of each is completely opposite. Schulz's father is a poet, a being absorbed by the delirium of the imagination, someone who has given wings to reality, because it is grey and flat. The importance of Schulz's father is the poetic and imaginative imprint he has left on his son, and the latter, as the protagonist of his stories, has also decided to make his father a co-protagonist. Practically all the stories are related: the same family, the same atmosphere, the same climate and tone of nostalgia and absurdity. The language, impeccable, reminds us of Proust, the absurdity of Buzzatti, and the poetic of Kafka, and yet, in such a short work, Schulz has managed to create a world where the allegory is evident, but not enough to explain the world he creates. It is something detached from the real world, something else that has been formed in parallel to the original thing itself. The change is in the subject's point of view, who after perceiving reality, has transformed it and then projected it into that same reality as an alternative. For example: the birds that the narrator's father raises are real to a certain point, but the variety, the size, the customs and the invasion of the house by these birds: is it real, is it imagination, is it illusion? The birds are there, and they are strange: these are irrefutable truths. The atmosphere is nostalgic, not magical but absurd, I insist, but not of a desperate absurdity like Kafka's, but festive, like a carnival of monsters that do no harm.

The highest point, perhaps, is the story *The Gravedigger's Sanatorium*, for me one of the three best stories of the 20th century (a worthy heir to Melville's *Bartleby* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*). A place where the real and the dreamlike intermingle until they exchange places. It is not strange that it reminds one of the sanatorium in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

Schulz's language is a strange and very peculiar mixture of varied sensory images, as when he relates objects through their visual characteristics and relates them to the auditory or odoriferous characteristics of others: forest and brown cedar, wood and tobacco, cello and wind.

To conclude, I mention that the first anthology in French was made by Maurice Nadeau, also author of an excellent study on the life and work of Flaubert.

William Trevor

*Nights at the Alexandra* (1987)

This short novel is one more of the ways contemporary English-speaking writers have decided to tell their childhood from the disenchanted point of view of adulthood. Related to Franzen's *Corrections*, the smaller number of pages and the less oppressive atmosphere do not prevent the similarity of tastes and pasts from being evident. There is a child narrator as the protagonist, a small town, a time convulsed by war, a progress that devours the treasures of childhood, a family that, like all families, is dysfunctional beyond its good coexistence. Because how can one assimilate that five totally different people must live together and share tastes and principles, defend pride and give up desires. Here the child protagonist meets a foreign couple: he is German, she is English, of very different ages. And the child finds in her especially an understanding and a treatment that his family does not seem willing to offer him. Prejudices of race and creed are the pillars on which the family needs to be established, and everything that upsets the balance of the days is rejected. The strange, the extravagant, must be forbidden, and yet a boy can see further than an adult, because he has not yet been blinded by the learned values. And inevitably, when confrontation leads to no middle ground, resentment sets in and pity has no place. Resentment of the boy towards his family, impiety of the family towards the strange couple. Then the boy becomes an adult, and beyond his own choice of destiny, he is a victim of that personal war, parallel to the war that ravaged the towns during that childhood. Alone, owner of a cinema built in honour of a woman who saw beyond worldly goods and good manners, to the person, the individual, the mind and heart of the boy. A cinema that has not withstood the advance of technological progress, and that will resist nevertheless because there are principles that never smell bad or decompose, they smell of humidity because they are archived in old attics, but they have not lost their strength. Alone and misunderstood, man remains the guardian of a place where the memory of a woman is firmer and more beautiful than any war, any family and any childhood.

William Trevor is a poet of narration. His language is clear, limpid, nostalgic and humorous at the same time. It has at times the ironic tone of Twain, the climate of Bradbury, the solidity of Hemingway, the hardness of Franzen.

Leónidas Barletta

Historia de perros (1950) Although it rains (1970)

The author was part of the Boedo literary group and therefore of the permanent confrontation with the Florida group. What confronted the

groups was the position of literature in relation to the world. Boedo claimed a social function and a commitment of literature to the urgent problems of society, which should be a spokesperson and a representative of popular culture. But this proposal was very different from how we might conceive it in the present era. At that time, the function of literature was to promote the social and cultural development of the people. The main goal of the novel and the story, of poetry, essays and theatre, was to represent the life of the people and to claim the rights of the poor and the proletariat. These were times of change and of justice that had been postponed for a long time. The aftershocks of the Soviet revolution were inevitable, along with the Spanish civil war and the Cuban revolution. The function of art as art in itself, committed to language only, as conceived by the Florida group, was a position of the bourgeois and well-off Rioplatense.

As in every group, there are good and bad representatives of the same, I mean, men whose principles are at the service of good literature and others where this is at the service of the social function. When language is only an instrument, it falls into pamphleteering, and it is difficult for the result to be good literature.

Leónidas Barletta was a great writer whose work is too broad to generalize, but judging by the two novels mentioned above, he knew how to give his own vision of the people without betraying the ends of art. The apparently simple language is very well polished. It is practical, but poetic at the same time. The detailed look at the people of the neighborhood and the towns is beautiful and concise at the same time. Its humor does not come from the narrator but from the well-crafted voice of the characters. But when one tries to represent reality there is always a selection, because we cannot portray all the things and events of the world at the same time. And at the same time, even if we dedicate ourselves to a particular area, or to a particular individual, the narrator's vision is always subjective. Therefore, in these cases the vision of the town that Barletta transmits to us is true, surely, but also idealized. And he must have been aware that this was inevitable, that is why he does not elevate his protagonists to a position to knock down others, but rather describes them as particular beings in a particular area and time. He is a storyteller, not a documentary filmmaker or a philosopher. The author tells without commonplaces or moral or social messages.

There is a political and social background, inevitably, barely mentioned, which does not influence the psychology of the characters. It is also true that these come close to stereotypes at times, that they all merge into a great characterization of which characters, animals and environment are part.

Both novels, as representations of a society and an era, have the structure of chapters that follow one another like episodes of different environments and situations. There is no precise or overly deep conflict, but rather a psychology of the neighborhood where each human or animal character is

a part and a special characteristic of this collective being. In *Historia de perros* the author actively participates in the narration, and even appears as a character and creator at the same time of the destinies of his characters. Although it rains has a more conventional structure, but the organization of linked stories is less shocking because the individual plot of a couple comes and goes within the general collage that tries to represent the neighborhood.

Just like Emilio Zola, with his differences, of course, Barletta approached naturalism with less crudeness but more lyricism.

Clarice Lispector

Family Ties (1965)

Thirteen stories. Thirteen stories that are a model of how a story should be written. Thirteen stories, like Faulkner's book of stories. A Latin American woman, of Brazilian origin, honoring, offering not only worthy of the memory of the North American master, but as perfect as him. Lispector not only writes perfectly, with the appropriate tone for each character, allowing herself as a narrator the necessary twists and turns so that local idioms add and do not hinder the main objective of each story: to explore in depth the hidden, deliberately hidden aspects of each human being. Man, woman or child, from each she extracts the shame, the pain, the fears (of growth, of love, of interpersonal relationships). She seeks and finds the general human in the particular human.

It is true that she explores with extreme thoroughness the feminine soul, of an adult woman, of a housewife, of a woman with emotional and psychic disorders, of adolescents who grow up repressed. But this is only one aspect of her search. Lispector digs with all her might and discovers the nature of man, of the adolescent male and his daily worries, his fears and his pettiness, of the adult man and his fears, of families as entities exposed to the dangers of the world. She finds the little things, facts, gestures, that suddenly change everything, change the course of a day and of a whole life. The best example of all this: *Happy Birthday*. An old woman turns 89, the whole family with children and grandchildren gather to celebrate her; she, hard, rigid, instead of blowing the candles, The cake is spit on the ground. A story emerges from this, a world is born from this attitude, and Lispector puts it to work so that we feel the fragile balance, the unclassifiable substance of human nature.

## Donde estviste de noche (1974)

This book of stories, very close to the date of the author's death, is very different from the one previously discussed. *Lazos de familia* is a book written at the beginning of the 1960s, in the full maturity of her life and her capacity as a writer. The one we are now discussing has the mastery of the person who wrote it, but the circumstances that nourish it are very different from those of the other book of stories. Here we must call these texts stories and not tales, for several reasons. First, they are shorter, with an impressionistic tone, almost like pictures at times, about an anecdote or everyday situations, but which under the author's peculiar vision become peculiar, strange at times, always profound in their connotation and transcendence. The longer stories, which occupy the first half of the book, are those that come closest to the structure of the short story, and yet they resist this classification. The search for dignity, whose main characteristic is to stamp a certain kind of woman in a particular situation, escapes from the usual to take on a Kafkaesque tone, of possible absurdity in this case, an allegory of the unsatisfied sexual desire that arises at seventy years of age and as a bitter surprise for the protagonist. The existential connotation and the repercussions on life, death and old age are evident. The departure of the train is another story with a more established plot, and yet it is still a succession of timeless thoughts assigned to two characters in a static situation: waiting at the train station. The text that gives the book its title is the longest and most complex. It is like a hinge point between both halves. Here the dreamlike and the fantastic predominate. We start from a chaotic situation: an orgy where spirits and humans mix, but all this chaos is organized as the hours of the night advance; when dawn breaks, the furies and lust calm down and are lost in the light. The same happens with *Dry Study of Horses*, here the guiding thread is a series of impressions noted in a kind of diary or notebook. The protagonist this time starts from a situation of earthly origin: her growth with a horse, and ends with the mythical situation of the king's horse. In this case the order of chaos leads to the discovery and formation of true desire and adult personality.

Probably these stories are influenced by the personal situation of the author, affected by cancer, and the impressionistic, reflective tone of the last stories cannot fail to be related to this circumstance. Even so, the skill and above all the continuous search, the permanent concern for good literature have kept her firm reins above cheap sentimentalism or light lyricism.

There are no defined arguments, but everything is lost in the author's mind; there are no psychologically developed characters, but everyone is a part of her, the impressions of her comprehensive vision of the world: of life, of death, and of what we leave behind when we leave.

Luisa Mercedes Levinson

The Pale Rose of Soho (1967) The Weavers Without a Man (1967)

The first story I read by the author, in a Sunday magazine, was The Opening, an excellent text that puts Levinson in a position of great narrator dedicated to creating strong characters in a wild environment, where cruelty is innate and forms part of the circumstances of the protagonists like breathing itself. The sections of Tales from the Coast and Stories from the Past stand out in this book, where the environment is irreversibly linked to the situation described and the characteristics of the characters. Stories like The Two Brothers, Adam Schlager's Family, show the disproportionate, exuberant and violent nature of the characters marked by the environment. In turn, the environment acquires relevance as such only through the actions of these characters. There are no clichés, there is no rhetoric, but there is a language that elevates the situation to a mythical level. The rest of the stories, although not at their level, do not deserve to be included in the collection.

In The Weavers Without a Man, on the other hand, I highlight only three of the 14 stories: the one that gives the book its title, Beyond the Grand Canyon and El Dorado. Why do I say this? Because what characterizes Levinson's language is language modeled on the environment, even if the environment he describes is not exactly real. The author chooses to mythologize places and characters, and this is what she does best, obtaining those austere, uncertain and cruel climates of the most successful stories. When she describes city characters, when she chooses the somewhat naive irony in the voice of the characters, even a certain The humor of a country or middle-class neighborhood, when he describes daydreams and uses commonplaces and words like "infinity" and "freedom" in a rhetorical context, always loses the tone that raises other texts to a level of transcendence.

When he describes concrete situations, he builds a legend with language, and in turn the language brings him closer to the reader to move him, because it has stopped being something general and distant to become something immediately related to one's own desires and frustrations. There is no psychological development, but an intimate coming and going, a mutual nourishment of the environment with the character, be it desert, pampa or river. The bridge is the language, which rises very high, elevating even cruelty and violence to a place of terrible beauty.

The rest of the stories are well written, no doubt. But they do not impact like those mentioned in this and the other book. They are trivial, almost a filler that bothers among the best stories. The daydreams, which do not rule out rhetoric and excessively cold language, and the trivial plot of a



couple of stories close to science fiction, are some of the most important flaws, in my opinion.

What makes an author stand out is his particular contribution, the brief flashes that rescue him from the rest. What Levinson contributes is masterfully shown sufficiently in the stories of *The Pale Rose of Soho*.

Abelardo Castillo

*The Machinery of the Night* (1992) *The Mirror That Trembles* (2005)

We must establish something from the beginning: Castillo is a master. Starting from this premise, any comment on any of his books cannot leave aside the high standards he has established from the beginning. The two books that concern us now are the last two books of short stories published. At first reading, the stories do not disappoint from any point of view, even if one expected to find a writer in his twilight, when so many of his generation have repeated themselves, like Cortázar. In these stories, Castillo demonstrates two things: first, that he has not lost his narrative mastery; second, that although his theme is repeated, he does not fail to find a twist, a variation that is more a spiral than a circle.

As always, in his stories the fantastic does not seem so, because the fantastic emerges and merges with the everyday, because the real has the same tone of language as the fantastic. The themes that are repeated throughout the five books of stories that make up *Los mundos reales* are grouped into various cells: for example, *Carpe diem*, *El tiempo de Milena*, *La muchacha de otra parte*, where the woman represents an ideal place that is accessed through imagination or dreams; *Corazón, Hernan*, where adolescence is evoked, its implicit cruelty and a tragic event (remember another story from *Las otras puertas*: *El marica*); *Thar, The decurion, The deserter*, where the theme of the double and time appear in various variations.

In Castillo, time is a flexible, permeable element, and space is subordinated to time. In *The one who waits*, there is a double parallelism: river/time and madness/sanity, both have interrelations: madness is a detritus that time leaves behind, like the river that changes its bed and deposits rocks and earth in the previous one.

The first-person narrator always seems the same in Castillo, but it is a characteristic that provides the general tone of impersonal-personal, the first provided by the argument, common, trivial at times, the second by the language. But both are exchanged, they metamorphose to create a

mythical, general character, but one that never stops having a particular voice. The resulting impression is that of reading a unique destiny but representative of the soul of man. The same happens with the women he describes, be they Milena, Agustina, etc.

Real time is represented by the older man/young woman couple, an instrument that the narrator uses for the game of time and space; they are doors that open to the different possibilities of reality.

The first-person narrator is confused with the third-person and even the second-person narrator, but there is no confusion, but rather a subtle and useful transition for the ambiguity of the style.

Castillo, at seventy years old, has not lost his skill, and these latest stories do not detract from his greatest achievements. They add up to and confirm a unique work, different within the great narrative of the River Plate region.

William Boyd

At the Yankee Station (1993)

This collection of stories by the British narrator brings together 18 exquisitely written stories, where there is not only skill and mastery in the genre, but also a concern for renewal and experimentation. Stories such as *Strange Situations*, *The Cork*, *Transfigured Nights* and *In Short*, break the linear structure to incorporate jumps in point of view to show the mental distortion of the narrator. The protagonist in the first story mentioned, the use of non-literary texts related to the plot to create intertextual links in the second story, diary fragments and time jumps in the third, and breaks in the time line of the story to create expectations or take the reader on detours and indirect paths to the end, in the fourth story.

The other stories follow more or less a more conventional line, and what stands out is the crudeness and mastery with which they are told. In many of them the plot is trivial, almost anecdotal: sexual awakening and learning to mature (*Almost Never*), where the vulgarity and torridity of sex is contrasted by a peculiar and emotional sensitivity in some of the characters. Another repeated topic is that of self-marginalized characters, failures or losers (*The Bat Girl*, *The Care and Maintenance of Swimming Pools*, *The Next Boat from Douala*), whose isolation and alienation can lead them to redemptive acts (as in the case of Morgan's character), even greater marginalization (as in the first and second stories) or lead them to commit criminal acts (*At the Yankee Station* or *My Girl in Tight Jeans*). It is

also common to see couples or groups of friends (Presents, Alpes Maritimes) with a witness narrator who is usually the third in discord, and who surreptitiously becomes the protagonist and, as if by chance, demonstrates his selfishness with trivial attitudes that transform into torrid actions at the end, and which are nevertheless common to all men because they do not distance themselves from any common and current social situation: a school, a university residence, etc. The last important point is the theme of unpunished crimes (Strange Situations, At the Yankee Station) committed out of revenge or justice, but the author never judges, he only shows and suggests through the characters and their thoughts and disquisitions the probable cause of such a crime. There are not even extensive interior monologues, since most of these stories are told in the first person or in a third person very close to the protagonist, therefore the action flows interwoven with the motivations of the character, who can even deceive himself but not the reader: Therein lies, then, the skill of the author, who without showing his intervention, is the driving force of his work.

Whatever the subject dealt with, Boyd tackles it with the necessary pity and harshness: pity when it comes to showing the cause and origin of the form or attitude of these characters towards life; crudeness when he must show what these characters are and do.

Jacobo Fijman

Poetic work

The only three books of poems published by Fijman during his lifetime are brought together in this two-volume collection from the Leviatán publishing house, plus a short collection of loose poems and a brief but accurate prologue by Carlos Riccardó.

Reading the whole of his poetic work, one should set aside the reputation that precedes it: that is, the personality of the author and the myth that has been created around him, which surpasses the author's work in diffusion and misunderstandings. Classifications and judgments of the case should come after reading it, if there is an opportunity and reason for them.

Starting with *Molino rojo* (1926), published at the age of 28, we find an already experienced poet, accomplished in his expression and his poetic resources. He already knows how silences and the austerity of language say more than many words. The use of colours as symbols, combined with other nouns that are in turn instruments or means of indirect adjectives, for example: silence-white-violet-yellow, are signs of peace but infused with

omens of bad times "Bitter breaths of madness". There is even more than one poem entitled Vespers. But madness has already been established in some way: "The bridge has twisted, like a grimace" or "The mills of images, paths without points of view", negative and positive points of the same visionary state. Because madness is a way of seeing more, standing on the edge of a precipice, of a point of no return, and daring to take the next step. Hence that first verse of the book, already so famous: "Madness, the most arduous and most deserted path". Bridges are at the same time hope, but they are also broken and dominated by silence. His resources in this first book are undoubtedly surrealist, not hermetic like in other authors, but he resorts more than anything to symbols and colors. There are bucolic images, practically absent in the other books, intended to capture a state of innocence related to childhood and other places already lost and unrecoverable, for example the poems *Alegría* and *Antigüedad*. The internal desolation predominates, and is transmitted through the desolation of the landscape, in *Mediodía*: "Silence has put him in a state of innocence, and he ... to the wind a lock of hours".

The transformation of the village from joy to desolation is one more of these passages. Even the winds, another widely used symbol, die in winter. There is, however, a last poem for an almost addenda, an addition, *The man of the sea*, which is a hymn and a last hope.

In *Hecho de estampas* (1929) we read longer verses, with fewer impressions and descriptions. Here the poetry shows expressive maturity in the sense of not surrendering to the effectiveness or skill of the image alone, but this image is at the same time not only a symbol in itself, but an incarnation of the mood, of the soul, in short. Because in Fijman there is no distinction between lucidity and madness, between soul and mood. Everything is the same entity that is expressed and is at the same time the poem, and that is a maximum achievement for a poet of such little production and so young. Here are some examples: leaning walls, the cold submerges in the branches, there is my childish laughter with the Blind grandmother of the dark night, we collect the shadow that falls from the birds.

In *Morning Star* (1931) we are in another state, no longer one of transition, like the previous book, nor worried about a gloomy future glimpsed in the distance, as in the first. Here the author has entered a state of beatitude, of devotion of which he is convinced but which he does not try to impose on others. Unlike so many other authors who make poetry a political or religious platform, a means to transmit ideas to impose, Fijman limits himself to making poetry an instrument and an embodied object of his soul, his new soul resized by the discovery of a new state of ecstasy and possibilities. And, curiously, it is not the ideas of Catholicism that prevail here, nor do they drown the reader with trite images or oversaturated with mysticism. Faithful to his style, Fijman establishes limits, which are those given by his own aesthetics and language. There is, therefore, a

commitment to art and language, which sets the limits to this expression of the new soul. Spiritual ecstasy is one thing, poetry as literature is another. He knows that the ultimate goal of literature is the blank page, to express everything without the need to use the limited means of the word. That is why the images in this book are restricted to a few that are repeated with a Gregorian chant rhythm, which gives flavor and smell to these poems. Here religion and mysticism are not praises or condescension. They are an expression of poetic faith, not allegory. Religion is absent as dogma, it is simply poetry because it expresses the lights and shadows of the same object sung. Repetition is not tiring, it is a rhythm of the mass of life: nature, voice, love, which become expressions, poetic means. Fijman is not a poet of objects, but of the soul that is incarnated in things for a better understanding. Few have come so close and expressed it so well with few words and resources, and perhaps the continuous repetition of those few words is both the resource and the meaning, the end of what he wants to express.

In the final report by Vicente Zito Lema, some questions arise that are worth mentioning. We wonder if he was really mentally ill, if that internal logic expressed in his poetry did not actually demonstrate another type of logic, another form of reality. We also wonder what are the limits of the normal with the abnormal, sanity with madness. Fijman's tolerant, almost pious words regarding his doctors do not seem like church hypocrisy, but rather a humility slightly tinged with cynicism. Because how much irony and sarcasm, how much play, how much true madness there was in him. Percentages that cannot be calculated by being doctors, poets, or religious people. Perhaps the deity that Fijman believed he discovered is capable of knowing them, a deity that may be born in each one of us as the rebirth of oneself in the midst of life. Perhaps art, by definition lacking logic, grants that space, or at least creates the conditions for such a new conception.

Alejandra Pizarnik

Complete poetry

A careful and long-awaited compilation of published and unpublished poems by the poet who died by her own hand at the age of 36. If we make a relationship between life and work and another great poet, Jacobo Fijman, who lived 72 years, more than half of his life locked up in a psychiatric hospital, we inquire into what could be the causes of such different positions in life. It could be said that Pizarnik did not find the consolation of religion, and desperation won her over, or that perhaps she was the one who suffered from an emotional or mental imbalance and deserved to be locked up for her own protection. But could each of them have created if

their lives had followed other paths than the one they followed? They are only questions, assumptions, finally hypotheses where the two of them are only a pair of multiples. variables. Life and art, like mind and soul, escape classifications and schemes, they evade the confinement that human thought wants to attribute to them.

We are left with only her work, which in the case of Pizarnik is much richer in quantity considering that she lived half as long as Fijman. This relates her to those authors who have died very young in a tragic way, usually by their own hand, or have abandoned their work early, for having nothing more to say. Perhaps this is what we should consider in Pizarnik's work. One ends one's life because it no longer makes sense, and when the sense is to "say," and one only finds emptiness, there is only one last emptiness to reach. And in all her work, irregular, intense and always sincere and exquisite, we find these constants: the silence of the words, the nothingness of the words that the poet always senses and is afraid of. Fear is another constant, but not fear of death, because it always appears as a consolation, a nothingness of peace, but of shadows, of uncertainty, of the inconstancy of human beings, of silence. As we said, her work followed an abrupt arc coinciding with her life, not in years, but in intensity.

Her first two books, from the 50s, published practically in her post-adolescence, show a poet already advanced, experimenting with a new rhythm, disruptive, almost dissonant in the music of the poem, and without a doubt this is what has seduced many young poets of the 90s, who have imitated her to the point of satiety. This is the merit of these books, which nevertheless seem to me immature, without much depth, mere valid exercises but too hermetic and limited in their transcendence.

With her third published book, *Las aventuras perdidas* (1958), the poet acquires clarity, a rhythm that is no less her own for being more conventional, with a style that has clearly marked itself. There is an expressiveness that is obtained through greater precision, which in turn gives it depth. This would be a problem in some of her following books, especially in the prose poems, which are overly adjective-based, with an overabundance of rhetoric. But returning to this third book, we see that the idea of innocence as truth stands out above all, which in turn is death, nothing: there where words commit suicide. We see how this constant is present from the age of twenty. Everything to come is, perhaps, a brief development in depth and density, and the rest, repetition.

*Árbol de Diana* (1962) continues the expressive search and maturity, finding her at her peak of vitality. It is, in my opinion, the author's best book. Here, night, nothingness, wind, death, air, silence, shadows are the substance of the poems, short, precise, forceful, sharp. Almost aphoristic, but without a moral or message. The idea of ancient memory prevails, which produces destiny before death, that from departure is the arrival.

In *Los trabajo y las noches* (1965) only the third fragment returns to the height of the previous book (although it does not equal it either). In the rest there is less subtlety and expressive depth. It is more serene, but as if exhausted both in the ideas and in the way of expressing them.

From *Extracción de la piedra de locura* (1968) I only rescue the second and third fragments (from 1963 and 1962, respectively). Here his poetic prose is overflowing, but the delirium and the rupture, as also happens in the poems of the first two books, determine a chaos without internal order. And all chaos must have internal logic to be understood even by the most experienced reader. In the fourth fragment, the theme of death is excessive, another problem that impoverishes a certain part of her work as a whole.

Up to this point we can conclude, at least temporarily, that the best of her work was developed between 1958 and 1963, and that this period can be extended to some poems from 1965, that is, from the age of 22 to 27 or 29.

Then comes *El infierno musical* (1971), the last book published during her lifetime. The prose poems are a repetition of clichés, where words abound with much less effectiveness than in her short poems. There comes a time when one can feel saturated by the repetition of the word "lilacs." There are excessive, saturating, unsubtle images that are not readable, even many commonplaces and without originality, even for her time and considering how much she would be imitated by so many poets of lesser quality than her. For example: if I saw a dead dog I would die of orphanhood thinking of the caresses it received, or winter climbs up on me like the lover of the wall, or in sleeping time, a sleeping time on a glove on a drum, and I am quoting the best of the most failed. There are parts where the questions for what, for whom, where, when seem to be from a very minor poet.

The poems do not The poems collected in books from the period 1956 to 1960 are all excellent. Pizarnik was a master of the short poem, because she endowed it with conciseness, strength and subtlety at the same time. Her poetry gives rise to its own, unmistakable identity. She gives an identity to nothingness, and behind the light there is darkness and vice versa, behind the windows, dead people. Identity, therefore, is defined by inversion: light-darkness, everything-nothing.

In the poems not collected in books from the period 1962 to 1972, I only highlight half a dozen, the rest suffering from the aforementioned flaws.

In short, one comes to the conclusion of having read a life on a poetic literary journey, with its splendid peaks and forgettable plateaus, the ups and downs of a life that encountered silence, that precious and feared good, won in the end by one's own merits.

Carson McCullers

## Complete Stories

The author's stories cover an extensive period of creative work, practically her entire life, since the first of them was written at the age of 16, in 1933 and the last published in 1956.

There are only 19 stories, but their individual quality makes each one of them an unrepeatable gem. From the first story, in full adolescence, McCullers showed her mastery of the genre with a story that conveys the changes of two teenagers in their passage from childhood to youth. One who is maturing with difficulty, going through the crises that determine the way in which others see him, struggling to be accepted, the concern of feeling different, and who sees how his cousin, somewhat younger, goes through similar crises but which he hides, or at least which he cannot see. Because every teenager believes that his suffering is unique, and his tendency to isolation makes him see in himself and in others a mystery that frightens him. And this mystery is what dominates at least half of the stories. The conflicts of adolescence: fears, jealousy, attractions, isolation, sex, obsessions, anxiety about something that is going to happen and that is going to change everything. Growing up brings changes that they would like to control, but they cannot, and when they want to see, everything has already happened, sometimes surreptitiously, and memories determine identity, without them having been able to choose. One is no longer one, but another.

The author shows cruel and sad landscapes with a calm and poetic tone, with brief details, from the most trivial, and it is in this triviality that makes the anecdote precise (inevitable) and endearing (sweet and bitter at the same time).

The ability to take over both male and female consciousness is astonishing, and transmits moods with just precise gestures and the climate of the story. There is in her style almost a mixture of Hemingway's precision with Proust's poetics of time.

It can be as crude as in *The Jockey*, an almost Hemingway-esque story, or as tender as in *Madame Zilenski* and *the King of Finland*. But its crudeness is never abrupt, but always filtered by the almost elegiac tone, not because it is overloaded but because it is melancholic, resigned, slow would be the adjective that could come close to this very peculiar style of narrative construction.

The lucidity with which she describes, through the mouths of other characters, her own experience with alcohol is commendable, because it



does not transform it into a protagonist nor does it turn the story into a speech for or against. She only tells a story where alcohol is almost a character that never speaks but is there, behind and next to the protagonists. Music is another essential element in these stories, since the author herself was a frustrated piano player. This element contributes two important factors: the atmosphere and tone of the prose, undoubtedly dominated by lyricism, and on the other hand the theme, that is, the fear and the feeling of losing one's own skill or ability. The fear of loss is a recurring theme, both in her teenage protagonists exposed to the loss of their childhood or their musical ability, and in adulthood the fear of losing their sanity, talent or dreams.

McCullers is merciless with her characters, but at the same time she surrounds them with a halo of tenderness. A difficult balance, because her prose is neither sharp nor cutting, but warm without ceasing to be absolutely sincere, perhaps wanting to demonstrate in this way the ambivalence of human beings. This ambivalence includes both the spiritual and psychological plane, as well as the sexual one, hence this kind of peculiar understanding of the male conscience, in regards to aspects that not many male authors dare to deal with. Her characters, in short, do not possess a conscious or deliberate evil, but rather seem overwhelmed by the weight of their own personality, which they would not know how to define or control. They are cowardly, sad, resentful, melancholic and passive. Many of them are sick, and the author's compassion, capable of suffering the same, weakens her. Ities, he addresses them not to justify them, or even to console them, but to rescue them from the anonymity of nothingness, to give them a space and an opportunity to speak, to show themselves, to talk and to continue their path at the end of each story.

### Reflections on a Golden Eye (1941)

This novel is an uncomfortable novel, even for this time, when we believe we have rid ourselves of the great majority of prejudices, especially sexual ones. But despite this, many taboos persist, there are areas where the precarious balance of emotions sways to one side or the other, where human psychology expands and deepens, recasts and mixes the factors that make up its complexity. To the point of making the human mind and soul an elusive, tortuous and extremely irritating fusion. And if this world is expressed in a way that is too clear, as expressive as the dirty, troubled water that reaches the shore where we are sitting, and whose aroma we cannot stand, we will even less tolerate reading it the way Carson McCullers does. Because she is not deliberately cruel or explicit in her narrative, her narrative is almost casual, clear, with few explanations, nor descriptions that try to fuse the soul or the moods into the landscape to

give a more expressive or artistic image to a corrupt situation. In her narrative there are no obscurities of language, nor unnecessary hermeticism, the characters are expressed as they are: sick for the most part, but this is a necessary conclusion that the reader reaches. The author limits herself to saying how they reason and what they are like, what they like and what they do. There are few flashbacks. For an omniscient narrator, the author withholds clues from the reader, leaving him wanting explanations of episodes that will later be clarified, such as Williams' murder or Penderton's gossipy nature. Her position is detached from what is happening, almost like a chronicler, but without journalistic artifice. Perhaps it is the only way to develop six main characters in such a short novel, almost a long story due to its structure. In this novel we can find several characteristics that define it: 1) short novel or long story, as we said; 2) six very complex characters (Six characters in search of an author? Pirandello?); 3) omniscient narrator who withholds information; 4) a certain distance from the narrator; 5) constant tension, granted by that long story structure; 6) the freaks, sick or with varying degrees of normality, according to the characteristics of the society that judges them, who take on a more human, more tragic character throughout the text, moving away from the sharp, bitterly expressed irony, to approach Greek tragedy, almost in the style of Sophocles in *Medea*.

A separate paragraph deserves Penderton, the character perhaps most unclassifiable, richest and most peculiar, most twisted of McCullers, is almost a mixture of all the other characters: male, female, hate, love, jealousy, resentment, emotional ups and downs, stupidity. It is almost a representation of the whole society, a sample of what is hidden under the masks that custom makes tolerable and possible in the midst of the superficiality of the social machinery.

### The Ballad of the Sad Café (1943)

In this novel, the author adopts a different tone. Although the characters are also freaks, the look and tone is more poetic, less irritating than in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. However, in another parallel in reverse, what at first seems to be a more lyrical and humanized look at the characters, as the action progresses, they become more complex, more grotesque, and undoubtedly become monstrous. Here, too, the resource of anticipation is used, a resource often used by the author, both in stories and novels, where there are always phrases that indicate that something has happened in the immediate future, that changed things or the course of a situation. And the resource is not abusive, but extremely effective for this type of narrative, because it creates a permanent tension, of something that is imminently going to happen, and in general that fact is not spectacular or too tragic, but almost common and ordinary like any simple fact of daily

life, but which will determine a break in the point of view and the decisions of the characters. Here the event is the final fight between the main characters, which changes the life of the protagonist, whom we believed to be a heroine, an anti-heroine in fact, but to whom the reader had taken a liking. And the character of the hunchback, to whom we should have given our pity and affection as readers, is taking the form that his exterior appearance shows from the beginning: a dark soul and a secret selfish purpose.

### Frankie and the Wedding (1946)

As she grows up, Frankie sees herself differently, she is another person just as the time she left behind is another. The previous summer she felt the most important change: dissatisfaction with herself and her dislocation in the world. Summers are often conflictive for pre-adolescents and adolescents, they are exposed to their changing and rapidly transformed physique, which they hardly recognize and with which they feel uncomfortable, they are also exposed to a forced exchange with others, if they do not want to be considered different and "strange", when in reality they would like to be alone and feel safe in their world. Because Frankie is growing up and her belonging to the world is doubly questioned: she is no longer the little girl, but neither is she the adult she would like to be and who she tries to imitate with clichés and comments that sound artificial and ridiculous coming from her mouth. She needs to feel equal to others so that they do not isolate her, but she also wants to preserve the ideal world whose remnants persist in her head when she contemplates and thinks about the world around her. The changes are represented by her older brother's wedding: with that wedding everything changes for her, her childhood disappears in a definitive way, her only bond is taken over by a stranger who takes him away. And Frankie needs and convinces herself that she must be part of that wedding and that marriage, that she and they are an insoluble whole, that is why she needs to talk and explain, and all Friday and Saturday afternoon she spends telling the strangers what she will do: go to the wedding and leave with them to see the world. She will leave the town, which limits her from being a great woman, a personality she is destined to be. Her father is a distant man, worried about his work, calm and sad after the death of his wife. He does not pay much attention to the mood swings and the whims of his daughter's growth, but he loves her and worries about her when she leaves the house for a few hours.

Frankie must make decisions, and she fears them, she faces her illusions, and she will make mistakes when confronting them with reality. She knows, she senses that we are all cut off from each other, and that is why no one understands her when she has the need, the urgent need, to talk to them and make them see what she is feeling. She makes the decision to go

with her brother and his wife, but the reader knows that it is a fantasy, that she will hit a wall when she sees the reality on the Sunday after the wedding. She will feel hurt, and the reader would like to warn her, to make her realize it. And this is the merit of the narrator, who has transported us, even in a third-person narrator's voice, to the mind and soul of Frankie, a 12-year-old girl.

Frankie grows up, and in the second part of the novel she is called F. Jasmine, because she feels that name belongs to her, and in the third part she is already called Frances, not yet a woman, but already on the way to being one, not only because her body tells her so, but because she has faced her first great disappointment: that of the change of things, that of the passage of time that nothing keeps intact. The beauty of childhood things can only be preserved in memory.

Frankie finds herself between two points of view: the childhood of John Henry, her younger cousin, with childish attitudes and postures, and the wise and rustic maturity of the black servant, Berenice.

Frankie discovers a world that Saturday afternoon, new sensations, but also the limits for every human being: lack of communication, loss. As she grows up, she knows that she will be freer than in childhood, she knows that she can go and do whatever she wants, but she also discovers that she will be more alone. She is a representative of the human race. A 12-year-old girl in a remote town in the United States, in the middle of a war, an anonymous girl and like all the others, she feels ugly sometimes, she knows that she is proud and stubborn almost always, but like all those of her age there are things that she will not be able to change, things that are too big, time and changes that sweep away everything, even what they themselves would like to preserve: what they were in their childhood.

Carson McCullers confronts her protagonist with something more severe and more deadly than all armies: the passing of time, the ravages of growth, and the impotence of pain in the face of death. Thus, McCullers becomes a worthy heir to William Faulkner, who, according to an anecdote, approached her one day in 1962, in an auditorium at West Point, and embraced her and called her "my daughter."

Marcel Proust

In Search of Lost Time (1913-1922)

The first novel in this cycle was published in 1913, but its gestation process began in 1909. The last novel published by the author was the fourth in

1922. The fifth and last, fully corrected and finished, was published the year after his death. The last two, with various versions without definitive corrections, were published later. Another important factor to consider is whether we should consider this cycle as one large, long novel, or as different novels that can be read independently. The endings do not necessarily imply The novels are not intended to be a continuation, since they are mostly open, the structuring of chapters and parts varies from one novel to another. In reality, there are no defined schemes, and the author seems to have used the running and flowing of thought and memory as the only continuous resource. This narrative form, at least in the way used by Proust, represented a change in an era already convulsed by social, political and customary changes. The industrial revolution, political changes, new social ideas, all this created a feeling of uncertainty that ends up materializing with the great conflict of World War I, which more than a solution was a way of destroying everything to re-establish a new century. And this feeling is what is attempted to be given in the last novel, where the characters survive the end of the century with customs and thoughts that are dying, decadent and out of place in a more austere world, less hypocritical in the sense that the high society of the 19th century understood it, but no less cruel. Social parameters have changed, the Dreyfus affair has defined a before and after in social labels and the veils that covered the wounds have been brought to light, or rather removed.

Therefore, the tone that Proust chooses is one that filters reality through the consciousness of memory. Thought becomes memory, and memory is spread out on paper. It is an attempt to capture time, not to let it pass without recording it; because the author believes that even memory, by its very definition: immortal for lacking time, is also exposed to death. Man dies and memory dies. And it was not a question of using the resources of naturalism, whose photographic objective was also destined to fail in many aspects and make the remembered era rhetorical and distant. To do so, he needed to break the linear and conventional structure of the nineteenth-century novel. He breaks with the schematism of the third-person narrator, and breaks in turn with the very verisimilitude that should be granted to him, according to the new modality, because this protagonist narrator character is almost omniscient. He intends to describe an era and a society in all their breadth, but rather than breadth in terms of quantity, it is an intention to revive a climate, a sensation, a smell that the remembered era perhaps did not have in reality, but which is granted by memory.

Proust chooses the filter of memory, which protects him from the friction of time and from equivocal glances. Here there is only one conscience, one glance that does not judge, only tries to explain. First in the memory of a child whose personality is lost in the context, it fuses, rather, it is formed by what he sees and hears. The first two novels are novels of learning, maturation and description of the best time of each man, childhood. The paternal home, the walks in the neighborhood, the visits to the houses of acquaintances, the theater, youthful love and its melancholic halo when it

fails, the holidays at the Balbec spa. Here he meets the group of girls among whom he will meet his future lover: Albertine. Up to this point the characters are very clear, the reader can see them clearly. However, the tone and the atmosphere are as if filtered by a protective veil that only lets us see the flashes and shadows, and in the middle spectrum a precise and lost flavour of melancholic and unrecoverable days. Here we find the symbiosis of art and life, as Thomas Mann later developed so well.

In the following two novels, the narrator character grows and matures. His profile takes on prominence and space within the plot. He is a regular at the soirees of the Germantes, descendants of the French nobility, whose whims and hypocrisies he reveals in his long paragraphs dedicated to describing the soirees and meetings. Political opinions are interchangeable according to the conveniences of the moment, the same happens with the relationships between the ladies who organize meetings and soirees every day of the week. Resentments and small domestic betrayals are created and the author learns that not everything is as it seems. His parents are at an intermediate level in this classification, if we can call it that. They are not assiduous to these hypocrisies of high society, nor do they dare to isolate themselves from the class to which they belong. His nanny and cook, on the other hand, serves as an anchor point, a contrast, a balance. She herself suffers from prejudices, meanness and vulgarity, but lacks the corrupt tendency to pretend to be what one is not. The character of Marcel's grandmother is another high point. The memory she leaves in Marcel goes beyond a lesson: it is the embodiment of a time forever lost. The death of the grandmother, as well as the death of the writer Bergotte, are two of the most successful and highest points in all of literature. Let us say here that, in our opinion, the best novel of the entire cycle is *In the Shadow of the Girls* (which won the Goncourt Prize in 1919), which, starting from the beauty of its title and ending with the endearing poetry of its prose, is unsurpassed in its objective of miraculously reconstructing an era with the hands of conscience and memory.

There is, then, a spiral development in the long plot, which begins from the periphery, that is, the description of the society in which the narrator grows up, to enter into a sector where his heart matures and gains space, as he learns to love the woman who will be his lover. In the fifth and sixth novels we find the climax: the narrator is trapped by the same method he has used to describe the other characters. If the mind of each one is a mystery, a vertigo, his is no less so. He finds himself caught in the trap that his thought, that is, the way he has chosen to write, does not allow him to escape or see from the outside. Although the novel's aim is to isolate himself from time, to emerge from it like a god and capture time in his hands to recreate it as he pleases, this same god-thought creation is also produced by his mind: that is why he himself is a product of his thought. Albertina escapes from his hands, he is unable to understand her, or rather to encompass her in all her different aspects. Because there are at least two Albertinas: the one he sees and the one she hides. He is obsessed with

jealousy, both from women and men. Albertina, until the fourth novel, is almost a narrated character rather than a character who acts. The general tone of the novel is like this, conjectural, indirect, veiled, ambiguous, tinged with a cruel or sweetened poetics, as the case may be. In the fifth novel, Albertina appears more like herself, and the reader realizes that she is not as the narrator imagined her at the beginning. She hides but we do not know what and how much of that is serious or harmless. Is it our imagination when we hear her speak or is it the author's imagination? This is where we must say something about the peculiar narrative voice. We know that the narrator is not the author, that there is a narrator character with at least two peculiar characteristics: he transmits more than it would be reasonable for him to know, and he has the virtue of establishing two different points of view: that of the narrator and that of the reader. Because it is very curious how the reader is introduced into the discourse, begins to see what the reader sees, and as this narrator voice is also a mixture of witness narrator and omniscient narrator, the reader sees the novel from two alternative and simultaneous planes: from the outside, as if he were reading a novel in the third person, and from the inside, through the eyes of the narrator. As Proust chooses to leave certain areas of some characters in opaque and ambiguous tones, even those of himself (although this is only intuited by the reader), the reader seems to discover things according to the narrator's point of view, feeling his certainties and his uncertainties, seeing clearly at times, and at other times, speculating and conjecturing. Thus, the reader, when he briefly rises a little above the narrator (a favour the author does him) realises that Marcel is making a mistake, and even then we cannot be sure. A very difficult narrative technique, which is more intuition and art than technique.

Another issue: Is Albertine's obsession with lesbianism a projection of her own fears and repressions? Let us not forget how the character of the Baron de Charlus is a very important influence on the narrator, and how on many occasions the Baron insinuates himself as his possible protector. These advances are rejected, actually ignored, but what is the rest, the residue that it leaves in Marcel's soul.

The sixth novel is much shorter than the previous ones, and has even been the subject of various versions depending on the editors, publishing or not the unfinished fragments that the author himself suppressed. It is true that these gaps leave empty places in the plot for the last novel. However, if we analyse the latter, we will see that we find nothing new after Albertina's death in the sixth. There she dies, and we learn of it, just like the narrator, through a letter from Albertina's aunt. She disappears, but returns to the narrator's consciousness and becomes memory and recollection again. And that is perhaps the best way to preserve, to retain, to never become disillusioned with someone. In Venice, where Marcel's mother takes him to console him, he, about to leave, hears *O sole mio* sung by a gondolier. The waters cut through the city, invade it, just as in the Balbec spa the waters bathed the beaches where he met Albertina. In that song about the waters

he senses something that he cannot define and that begins to frighten him. Perhaps it is death, something threatening that he senses as destroying everything, even memory. That is why he flees with his mother by train, reading a letter in which he is told that Gilberta, his first love, daughter of the grandfather, is a young man who has been killed by a young woman. The narrator, Albertina Swan, the man she took as an example in her childhood, is going to marry Marcel's best friend.

This novel is more of an epilogue than a proper novel. Its brevity, its speed, its forcefulness in narrating Albertina's death and Marcel's emotional state, make it a perfect epilogue for an entire plot that advances towards an emotional center: the narrator. All these memories have an objective and a goal, a function within the machinery of the entire novel.

On the other hand, the seventh is like the swan song without the lucidity of all that came before. It is a prolongation of emotional states without an objective, emotional rhetoric, perhaps. There are explanations and conclusions for various secondary characters, which are not essential and remove that halo of mystery and ambiguity that the narrative voice had previously given them. Although it introduces a more contemporary element (the First World War) as a factor of dislocation and a sense of loss in the old characters, it does not contribute anything in itself to the novel.

The axis of the whole cycle is the memory of an era, the changes are evident from the moment the author has chosen to remember it. The flavour, the colour of time, the sensations and smells of an era are felt through the words. The parallel themes, such as politics, society, sexuality, love, jealousy, lack of communication, death, are developed in long paragraphs that give rise to philosophical disquisitions tinged with simultaneous lyricism and crudeness.

I choose as the ending what Proust finished correcting before his death. The end of Albertina disappears in Venice, foreshadowing, relating it to Mann's *Death in Venice*.

Jean Santeuil (1895)

Novel published posthumously in 1952, found among his papers with a start date of 1895, it is considered an unfinished text. It is inevitable to compare it with *Recherche de temps perdue*, of which this novel is a precursor, a first attempt. However, I do not think that there is in any way such an exact parallel in plot and form that justifies calling it a sketch or a draft, or even a frustrated attempt, and even less the qualification of unfinished.



Proust's constant and unifying theme in practically all his work was time. Time as both an ally and an enemy of man, and things and objects as indifferent witnesses capable of recovering the past by opening a door, making way for the passage of memory. It is here that we must make the first comparison between the two. If in *Recherche* the great and at the same time subtle and small trigger of memory is the taste of tea with madeleines at snacks with Marcel's great-aunt, in *Jean Santeuil* it is the colour of the strawberry jam and cheese mixed at breakfast with his uncle.

We see, then, that there is the same style: poetic prose, whose theme is the memory and recovery of the past. In *Jean*, however, there is a more conventional treatment, more organized in the canons of the nineteenth-century novel, at least in terms of organization and alignment of the plot. There is a certain break, for example, in the jump in time to the future of the main character to say how he will see the situation narrated later, also the permanent disquisitions, and the organization in chapters dedicated to a theme, situation or determined character, always in direct or indirect relation to Jean. This gives it the configuration of a novel of memoirs or chronicles, where each chapter is almost a story of impressions, pictures, descriptions of places and sensations. It is more accessible than the *Recherche* because in this everything is mixed in the mind of the character and his constant, confused discourse, whose own mind chooses and hides in a psychoanalytic way what he should say or says only between the lines. In the *Recherche* there is bitterness, there is a constant tension, there is a feeling of sadness that grows, and that is felt from the first lines, because the memory itself includes the impossibility of reliving concretely what is remembered. In *Jean Santeuil*, memory is less sad, more reasoned, less profound in the psychological sense, less contradictory, speculative and ambitious, but no less poetic for that. For example, the theme of jealousy appears here as in the *Recherche*, even the homosexuality of the lover is more explicit and more direct, even confessed by her. Unlike Albertine in the *Recherche*, Françoise has almost no mysteries, and the disillusionment comes from both, from her and from Jean. There is a whole theory about love expressed as a thesis, about the nature of the lover and the loved one, which would influence Carson MacCullers so much. See for example the whole of part 9 of the novel.

As for the theme of the social image, it is equally cruel and precise than its successor, but even so it is less subtle, clearer, if you will, and it allows itself a certain irony free of the bitterness of the *Recherche*. The clearest example of this is the chapter Madame Cressmeyer's Lunch. If we talk about political issues, part 5 stands out. The books are written with the ductility typical of his education, and although we do not find the Proustian style, they are written with a certain charm between naivety and criticism, but without depth. There are parodies and studies of characters from Italian comedy, exercises that respond to a literary influence that impacted his sensitivity more than his lucidity and critical and intellectual spirit. It is a book that is the result of multiple readings, as evidenced by the large

number of epigraphs, very few in the rest of his work, readings of romantic and 17th century poets, of Italian comedy and classicism. I insist that there is not so much rhetoric but a certain simplicity in the conception, impersonality in the style and some flaws in the effective structuring of the texts that are closest to the story. The book *Parodies and Miscellanies* is a collection of loose texts published in 1918, but which were written from 1902 onwards. The fragment of *Parodies* is a literary exercise of no significance except for scholars of the author's semantics and style, where he tries to describe the same event from the newspaper pages according to authors of the time and before.

From the *Miscellanies* we must rescue two essential texts to know the critical Proust. Both are dedicated to the figure of John Ruskin, an author who gained the admiration of Proust in his mature period. The first (*In memory of the murdered churches*) begins as a travel book, where the author proposes to visit the cathedral of Amiens which served as a study for much of Ruskin's work. He seeks to visit the places where Ruskin passed through and lived. After describing the cathedral looking for the details and the point of view of the other writer, he dedicates himself to a more detailed and critical study of Ruskin. He is, in short, an author dedicated to studying another author, with whom he feels aesthetic affinities linked by similar sensibilities. One English, the other French, and the difference in languages rules out, in my opinion, any suspicion of bias, unconscious, no doubt, but always present when it comes to justifying the reasons why we like an author who speaks in our own language. Because the language barrier and the obstacle to overcome that constitutes the work of translating, filters, cleans and gives greater perspective. In both we find a love for beauty and the past, that is what unites them, but one takes the instrument of the other to tell his own vision, that is to say: Proust uses the depth and melancholy, which was lacking in his first book, of the Ruskinian vision of the beauty of objects and works of art of the past. Even the moral, the critical and intellectual moral, obviously, is a learning that he takes from the English. Therefore, there is admiration and criticism. Ruskin's defects are also part of his personality, and for this reason they are not rejected but incorporated into the admired being, into his chosen point of view. But above all and as a result of this exchange, the subtle and beautiful aesthetic balance of words emerges as the main one. The second study (*Reading days*) begins in the typical Proustian way, recalling his own childhood in his parents' house, where we will find almost the same references as in *Santeuil* and *Recherche* (hence the subtle and almost indiscernible separation between fiction and reality, which so individualizes Proust's vision). The times of reading in childhood lead him to make a study of the conference given by Ruskin on reading. Here we find quotes and opinions on what literature is and the way Proust conceived it: a friendship without commitment and without hypocrisy. He recognizes the influence of Gautier in his youth, but emphasizes his errors and a certain superficiality. Finally, he says that literature is not a mirror of truth, it is a part of it, because it is what the author sees.

The Essays are texts published around 1912, and all of them are preceded by a prologue and a conclusion. They are mature texts, where we find chapters that refer to episodes from Marcel Proust's childhood and adolescence, but which are mixed with fiction in countless references to Marcel from *In Search of Lost Time* and Jean Santeuil. At first we seem to be reading discarded fragments of his great novel, in others we find ourselves in dream worlds that rescue the past through a more psychological and Freudian exploration, more grotesque, perhaps, which surprises and revalues the reader accustomed to his prose. There are parts of chapters 2 and 3 that remind us of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Then come the actual essay chapters, preceded by the aforementioned memories and as if told to his mother after the first article published in *Le Figaro* (another reminiscence of *Recherche*), dedicated to various authors: Sainte-Beuve, Gerard de Nerval, Baudelaire, Balzac. They are very exhaustive studies, very critical, free of all adoration.

We see, then, that the organization in chapters as thematic cells works perfectly in this particular case. A 1000-page novel that is a pleasant read, tinged with social aspects, poetry, beautifully described passages, since Proust was a master in describing sensations, in translating painting and music into words (see *The Monets of the Marquis de Reveillon* and *The Sonata*, the latter related to Vinteuil's sonata in the *Recherche*, much more developed in the latter case). The descriptive passages are intensely beautiful and justify the entire novel on their own, and I mention *The Tempest* among many other chapters of this type. The ninth chapter of part 6 is devoted to the subject of time as an object of study, and there is also a precise explanation of his position on this subject in the chapter *The Agate Marble*. One of the many Proustian methods to explain and exemplify the subject of time is animism, that is, explaining the point of view of things, objects or nature, giving them a personality and the capacity for sensations. Later, this resource would become more subtle, confused in the multiple interpretations and disquisitions of the *Recherche*.

I consider that both are unfinished novels because the subject of both is time. The object of study, memory, an instrument to recover and stop time, should logically have a beginning and an end. One remembers something, an anecdote, for example, which has a plot with a beginning and an end. But the very essence of memory, which precisely lacks time, because it is a part stolen from it, implies its own interruption. Thus, the seemingly unfinished is a necessity and an end in itself in this type of novel, created and developed by Proust.

To conclude, I would say that *Jean Santeuil* is not an unfinished novel, at least not one that leaves a plot of clues or incomplete themes. The last chapter closes with a great disquisition on the generations of the Santeuils and the Reveillons, making their parallel with previous and future generations. The theme of the parents' old age is another point that closes

the arc of development of the work. The changes in the parents' personality and the growth of the main character.

Here we must necessarily mention an interesting game by Proust. In the introduction, two writers on vacation meet a writer they admire. Many years later, he calls them to his deathbed, and one of them finds among his papers a novel, which he decides to publish. Already in the text, the third-person narrator describes his main character: Jean Santeuil, but little by little he gets involved with literary appearances, mentioning the apparently fictional and literary environment of his setting. Thus, we realize that the narrator writes his own story as if he were someone else, that the close friend of his character is none other than the second writer in the introduction, and that both, his characters, find their author many years after having been created, and then claimed on the deathbed of their creator. But we do not stop there, the author is his character, and at the moment of death he recovers his past by being accompanied by his characters, fictional or real.

To what extent is the world of a writer fiction, we ask ourselves. Life and art, reality and fiction, are they separate entities? Is there at least some possible distinction? Even the reasoning of pure logic inclines us more to the path of uncertainty than that of practical truth. Because practicality may be that: not separating what is irreversibly fused.

Pleasures and Days (1895) Parodies and Miscellanies (1918) Literary Essays (1912)

The texts of *Pleasures and Days* were published in 1895, but written before and shortly after he was 20 years old. It was his first published book, with a prologue by Anatole France, an author whom Proust admired in his early youth, and whose influence he recognized, although he himself partially invalidated his value when he matured his own style. France was also the model of writer on whom he based his character of Bergotte in the *Recherche*. Therefore, we find an impersonal style, more attached to a school and a literary affectation that responds more to an instrumental form than to the result of a search. In this collection of stories where the description of customs and other short texts that we could call impressions and decorative prints prevail, if we look more closely, we can find some topics that Proust will develop later: descriptions of Parisian society, portraits of characters from that society, reflection of hypocritical customs. The texts that follow these themes tion. Personal opinions, without a doubt, which is something that cannot be overemphasized, even if he does not say it directly, but his criticisms of what he does not like are not imposed on us or are arbitrary, but are based on examples and founded on the authority of those from whom they come. There is a chapter dedicated to

homosexuality, with some successes that would still surprise us to hear today for their lucidity and good sense. Finally, in the conclusion there are fragments that summarize almost all wisdom and experience, which should be read in any site dedicated to the art of reading and/or writing. For example: "what we (writers) do is return to life, break with all our strength the glass of custom and reasoning that catches on reality and makes us never see it, it is finding the free sea," or "books are the work of solitude and children of silence. The children of silence should have nothing in common with the children of the word, ideas born from the desire to say something, from a fault, from an opinion, that is, from a dark idea." These and the following ideas are extraordinarily lucid, precise and need to be rescued from oblivion, just as Proust, like a Hercules, rescued the mountains of the past to the turbulent surface of the present.

Benito Pérez Galdós

Fortunata y Jacinta (1886-1887)

The language of Pérez Galdós is related to the naturalism and costumbrismo that prevailed in his time. Unlike other authors, this school had its own peculiarities in each country, marked by the great narrators, of course, not by imitators or second-rate writers. Pérez Galdós was a first-rate writer, perhaps one of the five best Spanish writers of all times. His language is direct, and in this novel there are no mysteries that the reader must unravel. Everything is served on a plate, even the course of the actions is so fluid and pleasant that it does not require a great effort to continue reading. However, despite this apparent simplicity and ease, this lack of mystery to which we readers have become accustomed since the 20th century, it is so excellently narrated that the skill in handling humor, costumbrismo and tragedy, as great as in a Greek tragedy, is astonishing. Because the image is Spanish, the twists, the dialogues, the manners and characteristics of the characters are Hispanic, but the passions that move the characters and the evolution of the plot are closely related to Sophocles. Not because of similarity of arguments, but because of the tragic and cruel way in which the characters go down the drain.

First important point: Galdós is an author of characters. More than the setting, exact and no more than necessary, the personality of his men and women is the most important thing. It is too strong, not in the sense of overpowering, but because of its contrasts and its very well-defined characteristics. The tone of the dialogues is essential for this, but it is not the only factor that characterizes them. The third-person narrator is immersed in the character's way of thinking; the character thinks and speaks through the narrator. In turn, the narrator participates in the plot

as a distant, indirect witness, almost a chronicler who develops a plot, who deliberately fictionalizes a story that he has once known through its real protagonists. This, therefore, increases the verisimilitude. (In the last chapter, we assume that the literary critic and playwright, friend of the apothecary, is the author who is not telling this story.)

As I said, the actions take center stage, almost without respite for the reader. Whether dialogues, direct actions, thoughts or dreams, the character is in the foreground, and the reader cannot turn away or ignore him. There are no classifications on the part of the author, nor are there qualifications. The few adjectives are the product of a way of saying things, a mannerism of language, a custom of popular style that the author transfers to the literary field in order to make it closer to the reader, more credible and without apparent intermediaries. The author loses himself in what he narrates: that is the main objective of this type of narrative. It seems a paradox, the excessive language of the 19th century does not seem in keeping with this procedure, but Galdós' narrative contributed this characteristic, perhaps more than Zola or Dickens. There is no lyricism in Galdós, there is a crudeness of a masterful quality in the narrative form. The characters are cinematic, and we cannot help but resort to this word, aware that the author was ahead of his time in this aspect.

Another great theme of this novel, which also occurs in *Tristana*, for example, is illness, both of the body and the soul. Both are reciprocally related in terms of nutrition and growth. And this physiological analogy is not capricious, because Galdós, more than politics and religion, suggests that the body is a The mind and the people are the factors that trigger destinies. The novel is a great study of morality, both of the time and in general, that is, as a concept. Costumbrism is more than anything a color, not the main thing, so the personalities of the characters merge into this background. Fortunata wonders about the prevailing morality (even in the simplicity of her personality). Guillermina Pacheco, Maximiliano Rubín and Mauricia are those who see beyond the everyday, they see the mystical through the filter of illness, madness or extreme devotion to an obsession. Feijoo and Moreno Isla have their own morality, more liberal, less attached to customs, adapting their own interest to the circumstances. Juanito Santa Cruz is the indifferent, selfish one who loves himself and without knowing or without wanting to know it, unleashes tragedies. Jacinta, more than a personality, is the necessary counterpoint, the point of reference for the character of Fortunata to evolve. Jacinta is almost the protagonist of the entire first part, and Fortunata does not appear until the second. But the protagonists of this novel with multiple characters do not need to always appear to continue as main characters. Their influence remains in the others, and those who seemed secondary become more important as the plot develops (the most typical example of this is the apothecary Ballester).

The characters, having reached a certain point in the novel, begin to mimic the ideas they represent. Their characteristics and the destiny to which

they are headed become so well defined that they take on an almost metaphysical halo, they become ideas. It is not strange, then, that characters like Mauricia, Fortunata's alcoholic friend, is the one who initiates these flirtations with the mystical and the religious hallucinatory. The religious is confused with blasphemy and popular rudeness, superstition and mental illness. Then, Maximiliano Rubín will be in charge, with his lucid madness, of explaining the deepest and highest connotations of the novel, with his mystical delusions and his obsessions, his jealousy and his extreme reasoning.

Love, the other most important theme, is, above all, bloody, obsessive and unrequited. Human love is not a sublime love. There are, therefore, two very contrary sides in this novel, not sides of social classes, although in some factors there is a parallelism, but of conception of life and morality. There is revenge, jealousy, madness, justice, love and hate, resentment and revenge. All this is mixed in a whole that envelops the characters, and none of them has the capacity to take possession of just one of these feelings. Fortunata goes from hand to hand, tries each one, and finally learns, although she must pay a high price.

So, the main themes are: morality (good and evil), love (mistaken), illness (symptoms of a society). And it is curious, for our mentality accustomed to the effective and artificial, and practically a master class, the way in which these themes are shown in all their crudeness through a common and ordinary environment, with simple, mediocre characters, in a neighborhood of Madrid at the end of the 19th century.

Let us cite some examples where Maximiliano Rubín, almost the priest and self-proclaimed prophet of morality in this novel: "I understand that it hits you so hard. That's how it hit me: but then I became stoic. I have gone through all the crises of anger, rage and madness." "The bad never perishes. Evil engenders and the good are annihilated in sterility."

The character of Rubin, who from being so petty and weak, of such a small thing as his body and personality show at the beginning of the novel, is transformed into that profane prophet of the sad and the bloody, the last conqueror of an idea: the holy idea of what Fortunata was not and could have been.

Novels 1881-1885. Other texts. His shortcomings

With *La desheredada* begins what is called the stage of contemporary novels, that is, those located not in the first stage of the 19th century or the end of the 18th century, and with a background of political events. Galdós, as we have already said, is an excessively prolific author, this series of novels demonstrates it: six novels published in five years, to which we must

add the Episodios Nacionales written in this period. Comparing with the first stage until he was 35 or 38 years old, we find an advance in the quality of his narrative. Let us not speak of his skill and craft, the exacerbated and endless fluidity of his prose, his grammatical quality already defined practically from the beginning. What we seek as readers of the 21st century and as critics is to determine the quality and strength of a narrative that can withstand the passage of time and that in itself has a beauty that does not necessarily have to come from the style, but from the subtle interweaving between the anecdote referred to and the way in which it is told to us. Galdós's is a valid form,

No doubt, but as the novels are added, it shows its limitations in terms of resources. Let us leave aside his imagination, always attached to the surrounding reality and therefore broad but narrowly formed, like a square with strict borders. Reading one novel after another is like walking through the same places with slight variations, seeing even the same events with modifications of characters and clothing. Even the characters, so multiple, are sometimes seen repeated not because of the need of the plot, but because of stereotypes. We are not talking about characters who reappear on the scene, shaping a world, which is one of the virtues of the Galdós world. There is, then, a style that has already been defined, perhaps in spite of itself, it has settled on its own virtues, which are many (humour, irony, detailed observation of characters), but also on its flaws and errors (the rhetoric, which although it has diminished is felt not so much now in the language as in the plot and the author's stance; the anachronism of certain situations; the repetition of funny details that remain anecdotes, without taking on more depth to serve as a drill in the social criticism that it aims to develop; the monotonous tone due to its lack of contrasts). The naturalism adopted by Galdós is excessive, perhaps. It is not the crudeness of a Zola, nor the cold or cutting exploration of society and the soul of a Balzac, but a study of the common and ordinary. The problem is not the choice of the object of this type of naturalism, but the form chosen to express it: Galdós's prose, in the period we are talking about and which takes us up to his 42 or 43 years, is a prose that explains more than necessary, in reality there is a continuous intervention between the author and the reader. The dialogues are very real, there are many actions, the drama is constant, all these are virtues. But even when the author does not intend to intervene as a chronicler, which he tends to do in most novels, the prose is compromised by appeals, references, ironies, nationalisms, which put the author on a level with respect to the page. The reader knows that it is something he is telling us, and the characters take time to become effective, they have a hard time freeing themselves completely from the author's opinion. Above all because Galdós' style is not emotional, it is not poetic, it is strictly common, it is not even ruthless or confrontational. He does not encourage one to take sides for one position or another, even when it comes to his too frequent incursions into the political history of Spain and Europe in general. He is a supporter, even if he does not exaggerate in his qualifications and tends to control his ideas with the lasso



of his narrative ability. In short, this type of stylistic choice and point of view seems to have aged Galdós's literature, making it monotonous, without the brilliance of contrasts, even weak due to its apparent sliding over the surface of reality without falling into pits or stumbling over obstacles. I insist, the problem is not the plots, which are well structured, not by characters in themselves, well characterized, with a tacit psychology given by their gestures and customs, not even a weakness in the writing. But the tone, the way of speaking of Galdós's prose, too self-indulgent, with the comedy that is very deceptive and treacherous. Whether deliberately or not, there are styles that sometimes age not because of a lack of virtues, but because of the excessive or careless use of them.

Galdós's stories leave much to be desired. His foray into the fantastic (Celín) is not at all successful, his fantasy seems too sublimated to an anachronistic comedy that tries to take the Cervantine style for a lesser purpose. The other stories show that the short story is not Galdós's strong point. They are few to evaluate any merit in them, we have already seen that he is an author of long windedness and progressively slow on his way to maturity, and they also sin of excessive rhetoric.

As for the articles and miscellanies, they serve to show his perceptive and critical outlook, his deep concern for the destiny of his country. It demonstrates his strong roots sunk in politics and places him in the place of politically committed writers. It is a position that he did not try to abuse with bad taste or low blows, his culture and his quality as a man and as a writer prevented him from doing so, but that could not keep him from trying to capture a social and political reality through literature. Fiction seems to have been an excuse rather than an end in itself. Creating a world that was actually re-created. For this reason, his articles and comments, written throughout his life and alien to the literary style that followed his work of fiction, as well as his travel books, abound in positions that today seem arbitrary and weak, but that in his time must have been brave and controversial. Without a doubt, However, ideas age, lose meaning, and the search for depth, whether in an article or a travel diary, does not appear in this case.

The plays fall into the same characteristics mentioned above. There are 23 works, some based on his novels. The characters are vivid, the dialogues very real, but they are difficult to read in this current era. They have lost relevance, and what should persist: human conflict and social depth, which is what Galdós's gaze aims at, does not appear, or is so lukewarm that it is frustrated by rhetoric and a certain anachronism in dramatic language.

The National Episodes corresponding to the 1st and 2nd series again lend us the same virtues and flaws of his already commented work. Certain negative characteristics are added, such as being "commissioned" works, which although they were not strictly so, have been created with a prior extra-literary objective: to dramatize episodes of the sociopolitical life of Spain immediately prior to the life of Galdós. It is interesting that he does

not go directly into the lives of well-known characters or those in high political circles. Faithful to his style and literary criteria, he uses ordinary characters who are involved and affected by the socioeconomic changes that such events cause. The problem is the affectation, the lack of depth in the soul of the characters, the absence of contrasts and even originality. The 3rd series belongs to a more mature period, that of the 1890s, a time that showed his greatest mastery of narrative since he created *Fortunata and Jacinta*, but despite the more advanced, less rhetorical language, we find partiality and a weakness, an almost affectation, an unhealthy gloating in the literary vices already mentioned before. The 4th and final series has a mature and careful language, but uses the same resources that were already out of use even for the time (we are talking about the first decade of the 1900s). The treatment of history in these series of novels is undoubtedly meritorious, a way of humanizing eras, episodes and central characters, dramatizing and fictionalizing at the same time. A way of making history popular that much later would have writers and pseudo writers of abysmal difference and quality in relation to Galdós. But even taking into account all these merits, reading these historical novels becomes heavy, difficult and soporific. The characters seem likeable because of the way they express themselves or are expressed, and the drama is lost due to an excessively narrated and described treatment. There is no closeness despite the vivid characterization of the protagonists. There is a distance that should not exist even if we are readers of the 21st century. Where is the human drama of history? Where is the line where language becomes drama, conflict and reality? Because the reality of a character is not in his pleasant colloquiality, nor even in the truths that he can declare in his speech, be it a clergyman, the owner of a pawnshop or a greengrocer, but in the poetry of a facial expression.

Galdós reached these moments on rare occasions, in my opinion. *Fortunata y Jacinta* was one of them, *Viridiana* was another. Both, the first in a more plural and collective way, the second as a chamber duet piece, expressed two different worlds in the same world created by the author. Women and men not qualified but described by their physiognomies and their gestures, their actions and their reluctance to act, but above all by what is not said about them. That which emerges from the cruelty resulting from the facts: the severity and selfishness of old Don Lope, the submission and cold resignation of *Viridiana*; the pathetic madness of Maximiliano and the obstinate and fatal simplicity of *Fortunata*.

Novels from his early period (1870-1878)

According to the author's biographer, Federico Sáenz de Robles, whose study of Pérez Galdós is as comprehensive and profound as one might wish, but which does not mean that it is not, in my opinion, excessively

condescending and in a style that Galdós himself would have avoided, that is to say, a confusingly florid and baroque grammar based on rhetoric, the novels from his early period are dedicated to studying the first half of the 19th century and the change that this turn of the century produced in the customs of the 18th century. *La fontana de oro* is Galdós's first novel, a quasi-comedy where he abounds in the humor and irony that would later characterize him. Here, however, this humor is lost and is overshadowed by certain structural twists and stylistic choices that turn the novel into a pastiche without substance. There are period features, likenesses of committee meetings in Madrid clubs, there is an old man-young woman relationship that recalls the much later and superior *Viridiana*. The author adopts a romantic style when he tries to capture the idealistic point of view of the characters, he is more ironic and laconic. or when he describes the old characters, whose ferocious mask turns into a caricature. The characterization of the three women of Porreños, a kind of witches from *Macbeth*, is admirable. But the novel is spoiled by the long speeches, by the rhetoric that appears without any deliberate ironic intention. The resolution is even too conventional, more in tone than in plot. It becomes a serial, but moving away from the ironic trait that seemed to guide it at the beginning. In any case, it is the one that comes closest to the items and the critical point of view, and the development of the characters, that we will see later in *Fortunata and Jacinta*. The next novel, from the same year and at the age of 27, is *La sombra*, with a fantastic theme, not very original in the subject and very rhetorical. Then comes *El bold*, at the age of 28, a novel with a social and political theme. The ironic trait has been lost and the author takes his intention to transmit ideas too seriously, even though he introduces it into novelistic plots. In this case, the serial novel is translated into a melodrama interspersed, of course: with skill and craft, between fragments full of descriptions of customs and political characters. In *Doña Perfecta*, a los 33 años, another theme that worried the society of the time appears, the confrontation between religion and the advances of science. Here, again, the novel serves to introduce a social theme without literary force or effectiveness within a family plot. In *Gloria*, the same conflict is dealt with, with the aforementioned lack of irony and where the characters fail to move us because they have lost strength. Even the descriptions have been tinged with a futile and mediocre style. *Marianela* falls into the same defects previously mentioned. In *La familia de Leon Roch*, there seems to be a certain takeoff of the literary flight at the beginning, but the intentionality reappears. The conflicts between religion and science, absolutism and liberalism, are outdated for our century, but that does not mean that the theme should lose strength if they are the background for the characters' conflicts and not the author's main objective. That is why the novels age with the era they try to talk about. In this first stage, up to the age of 38, there is a lack of intelligent and keenly observant humour. Working with ideas instead of people does not work. A novel must be born from within the character, not built like a building to be forced into the characters' heads, like a ship in a bottle. Besides being

extremely difficult, we run the risk of ruining everything in nine out of ten attempts. In any case, Pérez Galdós's pen, always keeping in mind this early period, far exceeds, with its skill and intelligent narrative construction, that of many authors who are considered to be of great prestige today. We must remember that there are authors who need time to find their great strength, the style that will leave a mark on the history of literature. It is not the number of novels that indicates genius, but a few, sometimes just one, and to achieve it, some writers need long and prolific paths, others, just a few years and a few works.

## OF THE BROOD OF DOGS

"It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us our best, and at our most creative."

Doris Lessing

Doris Lessing

### A Conventional Marriage (1964)

The second novel in a five-part novel cycle, it tells the story of the brief married life of Martha Quest. Martha is a young white African woman of English descent. A nonconformist, from the beginning of this novel we meet a character who, after just five days of marriage, feels that she has made a mistake. Since the party and the wedding night turned into a night of drinking with another couple, Martha feels uncomfortable and out of place. She dislikes her only friend, but she does not dare to snub her. Her husband, whom everyone praises, is a stranger to her. The novel begins with the consultation with the gynecologist, a doctor accustomed to the "hysterias" of newlyweds, and always with a kind word to comfort these women's fears. Martha does not feel comfortable with her marriage, but they try to convince her that everyone has been through the same thing, from the justice of the peace, her mother, the neighbors, her friends and the society made up of the white middle class of South Africa. Martha has had an adolescence interested in socialist and leftist ideas. These amnesties are a sign of the fact that the marriage is a very difficult one, and that the marriage is a very difficult one. Martha's imaginings drift

away as she finds herself settled in a bourgeois marriage. She does little to resist the current that sweeps her along. The entire first part is devoted to Martha's accommodation: seeing herself as a married woman, just like her mother, whose submission to conventional patterns she had set out to combat. The second part finds Martha pregnant, and she describes with precision free of all sentimentality the discomforts, the annoyances, the pains and the regrets that constitute the different stages of pregnancy and childbirth. She finally has her daughter, whom she did not deliberately seek out. She does not hate her, but she must learn to love her. The third part is devoted to the departure of Douglas, her husband, towards what is now the Second World War. Martha must raise her daughter in her first steps. She feels that it is impossible to control her: the child does not want to eat, she sulks and defies her. Martha is tired and hates the child. She loves her, of course, but she feels that she does not have the strength to make that love sufficient to educate her properly. Her ideas, which have characterized her among people as strange and extravagant, tell her that she should not fight with her daughter, she should give her freedom, but she falls into the same errors and the same tyranny of her mother with her. When Douglas returns, she is not happy. In his absence, she tried to meet soldiers of the British Air Force based in the colony. He did not intend to be unfaithful, and he was not, but she needed to seek shelter from her daughter. The rest of the women in the city did the same, but none were willing to admit it, except behind closed doors. The fourth part is dedicated to Martha's marital crisis and her dedication to political work.

This novel departs a little from Lessing's other novels in that it is, perhaps, more naturalistic, in a broad sense. First, because the protagonist's point of view is no longer the only one. The author allows herself to vary the viewpoint towards the secondary characters, which gives us a more comprehensive and less subjective vision. The author is willing to consider all points of view: that of the abandoned husband, that of the justice of the peace, conservative and yet claiming to be liberal to satisfy a hypocritical intellectual need, Martha's friends, her father, her mother-in-law. It is a novel that shows us only a fragment, broad, it is true, but only a part of something much larger, a certain society: racist, hypocritical, willing to do anything to maintain its status quo. A parallel theme is that formed by the sociopolitical environment, to which Martha as a character is intimately linked by her role as a woman and by her ideas. The theme of war, for example, is treated in a similar way to what happens in *In Search of an Englishman*, war as a means of economic benefits, of prosperity for certain cities and social classes, war as a time of camaraderie and union from the interpersonal point of view. This is a harshly critical view, not of war itself, but of human conditioning, of human nature, which sees war as something horrible but which at the same time generates contradictory feelings: hatred and exaltation of brotherhood.

In this novel by Lessing, as in many others, no one is innocent. Martha herself behaves almost coldly, with a cynicism that borders on cruelty. One

sees this clearly when she decides to leave her husband, and he appears to break down. But this coldness is an intuition that makes her see beyond people's attitudes. As readers, we will see that Douglas is not as much of a victim as he seems, but Martha is not entirely innocent either in her three-year submission to this marriage, which no one forced her to enter into. The entire novel revolves around these contradictions of Martha: she wants and does not want to be married, she wants and does not want a child, she likes political work but does not make an effort to do so. World events are a flagrant contradiction for her. And in reality, she has never been in love. She only believes she is when she meets a soldier with leftist ideas, but it is not a passion that moves her completely either. She is only willing to take the risk, finally, when she leaves her husband and daughter to lead a life more in line with her feelings. Because she does not really know what she is looking for, she only knows that her current life is damaging her. She does not ask for forgiveness or excuses, she just needs to leave. She does not believe she is better than others, but guilt is not a feeling that bothers her too much, she has already seen how others have tried to mold her to their interests. She has seen others speculate, make plans behind others' backs, a particular hypocrisy that she projects towards the society in which they live, isolating and keeping apart a sector, the black natives, in a kind of socioeconomic ghetto from which they are allowed to leave only to have fun or to fulfill their short aspirations of social condescension. The final episode

The final scene, with the spectacle of the black boys playing a shameful role, is an almost sinister example of the way in which the grotesque and the highest cynicism are sponsored by only apparent displays of goodness.

Lessing, with her usual mastery, alternates between the personal and the psychological, the political and the sociological. Human behavior is shown sharply, but it is also meditated on through the patterns and conflicts of a woman, neither free nor exempt from defects, even possessing a certain insensitivity or selfishness. Perhaps we should call her an individualist, undoubtedly with a marked tendency to distrust what she sees and what she is told. A woman with an open gaze and the need not to be tied down in any way. What is called common sense has made her assume responsibilities and conduct in accordance with what the rest do. But she resents the chains: her mother who meddles in everything and tries to control her, her husband who expects her to behave in a certain way, the women of high society who look at her with distrust because they have found out, even before she did, what she thinks and does. Contradiction is a state of today's society, an intersection of opposing forces: we hate what we love, we want freedom but we fear it, thinking is too much effort and conformity is much cheaper and simpler. The world of an apparently conventional home is as pathological and sickly as the rest of the world. Lessing does not use explicit allegory, nor the obvious or expected, through parallel behaviors or related plot lines. She tells us over almost three hundred pages as if she were telling the personal story of a friend, but at

the same time she is, to our great wonder and our great shock, telling us the story of the world today.

### Martha Quest (1964)

The first in the cycle of novels starring Martha Quest, it tells us about the protagonist's first steps out of adolescence and facing a life alone in the city. We see, as we will in the second novel (*A Conventional Marriage*), Martha's rebellious, nonconformist nature in relation to her parents, to the parameters of life they followed, and therefore to the place they chose to live. It is a farm in Africa, where poverty is important if judged by the canons of English life, but Martha discovers that for the black natives she and her family are rich. Thus, she discovers, or rather conforms and confirms ideas that she has learned from books: politics, history and society. Her Jewish friends give her this rebellious side, but Martha finds herself torn between two forces: the outside world to which she wants to belong in order to impose her ideas, and the world of her home, conservative and prejudiced. Her father yearns for the time of the First World War, as if only in that time had he felt like a man. His family life is dominated by his wife, who must control everything and conform to her wishes, and the fights between mother and daughter. He then decides to become absorbed in a hypochondria that has no other reason than this. The tyranny of the mother revolts Martha, who does nothing but do things that she does not even want, for the simple fact of contradicting her. Finally, Martha leaves home, gets a job in the city, discovers that she is incapable of the smallest thing and knows that she must learn. At the same time, she is absorbed by social life, meets boys: one a snob, another a Jew, and finally one from the optimal class, that is to say: the white English middle class, whom she will finally marry, carried away as if by a vertigo that she does not believe she will be able to stop.

This is the trait of this young Martha, and it will extend to the next novel, but with more complicated consequences. Martha is a contradiction in herself. It is true that she is a very young woman, with a personality that is still forming, and a temperament that leads her to be impulsive, but it is precisely these traits that serve as the author's instrument to highlight the characteristics of the society that she wishes to study and criticize. If Martha were an example of virtues, or simply a passive woman who accepts the canons imposed by society, there would be no conflict. But from the moment that Martha experiences, accepts, rejects and accepts again, thinks, desires and contradicts herself at the same time, she shows us what each one of us has experienced on our own at that same age. The political situation is also a suitable scenario, a British colony in the middle of Africa, a kind of British oasis that resorts to its cruelest weapons to preserve its way of life against all threats: the natives, leftist ideas and the

outside world. To do this, each of its members must collaborate, first by submissively accepting their role, in this case as wife and future mother, then by protecting that way of life with cruel cunning. That is, then, what the new Martha's friends do when they humiliate Adolph, Martha's Jewish boyfriend. It is the most important part of the novel, the most clarifying for the reader and for the protagonist. But the effect on her is not one of rebellion, but of submission, not conscious, but veiled, beginning a new way of life that is more conventional, more accepted by others. Douglas, the man she will marry, seems the perfect man for her: he shares her ideas, understands her, and more than a boyfriend he seems an ally. But he begins to show certain aspects that will become more explicit in the next novel. The author shows the character of Douglas as another result of the contemporary contradiction. A good man who distances himself from Martha when he sees that she also deviates from the canons. But that will be seen in the second part. Here, Douglas seems to hide something, and at the same time show himself different at every moment. Lessing's mastery combines particular and general reasons: what the protagonists feel seems particular, but it is a projection of human nature in general, the result of our own determinations and of the environment in which we develop. One aspect that differentiates this from the second novel is the descriptions of the rural and wild environment of the farm. This poetic element highlights another of Martha's dichotomies: she hates the farm because it represents her parents' way of life, but she knows that she loves sunsets and open countryside. She is attracted to the city with its liberal and cosmopolitan way of life, but she finds herself subjected to a new chain, the most exquisite, most sophisticated, most underhanded but for that very reason most lethal cruelty.

Although this cycle of novels tends to be seen as feminist, by her point of view, Lessing never condescends to any sex. She exposes Martha's pettiness, her mother's vileness, her father's weaknesses, her husband's evasive, closed-minded and schizophrenic nature, the hypocrisies of the justice of the peace, the false ideals of political activists, racial and religious prejudices. Her view is comprehensive and ambitious, it is collective and choral. Unlike other authors, she does not let go of all these factors and points of view. The author never detaches herself from Martha's gaze, she is always on the scene, and each aspect of life is explored through the eyes of her protagonist. Martha is all women, without a doubt, but she is also all men as a representative of the human race. All this does not prevent her from continuing to be a woman with peculiar, unmistakable characteristics, irritating and sensitive, childish and adult at the same time. Her gaze is uniquely hers, we know that it is Martha who speaks, thinks and feels. Through her we see the world, which is ultimately a projection of herself, and the world an object of study and experimentation for her. A journey back and forth barely glimpsed, naturally expressed by the author's master pen. Because that is what literature is, to shape the world in our own way, without anyone thinking that the voice of the speaker is other than one's own. I wonder what the



secret plot of Doris Lessing's craft is, how this non-argumentative, but rather schematic, stylistic, or whatever you want to call it, framework emerges from her mind. This marvel of language that supports translations and long readings, where the fascination is not placed in grotesque effects or low blows, but in the elegance of great literature.

The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, of Griot and the Snow Dog (2005)

There are prolific authors of irregular quality, there are authors of great quality with reduced work, there are multiple variants of all these factors, as many as there are writers. But there are certainly few authors who combine their enduring quality and their abundant work, and who can also be said to have no lesser work. Lessing is one of them. At the age of eighty-six, she published this novel, which can be classified among her speculative fiction works. The boundaries between genres are irritating in themselves, useful and clear only when speaking in generalities. But when we need to fit a particular work into these classifications, there is always something wrong, parts that do not fit, others that are superfluous or do not match, leaving empty spaces that we cannot explain. Wisely aware of this, Lessing has written books within the so-called science fiction, but it is never easy to classify any of her works. Even the most realistic ones share by analogy in theme or narrative technique various styles and planes of reality, including the reality we call fantastic. She knows that everything is about simultaneous planes, attached in superimposed layers and at the same time adjacent. It all depends on the point of view, and the instrument that drills these walls is his writing. It is always Lessing who speaks, it is his inimitable style. where she narrates but it is her characters who look. Her language is involved in the minds of the characters, and all see with the skill and compassion of their creator's gaze, however they themselves are always the authors of their lives.

This novel tells us about a world, probably the Earth, in a very distant future, long after a second great glaciation, the subsequent thaw and the subsequent drought. The simple, austere, almost parabolic tone, common in her narrative, is very suitable for this type of fiction, because it removes all the artificiality and explanatory rhetoric. The great problem of science fiction is its capacity for verisimilitude, a trap that leads to unnecessary explanations or mere absurdity. Lessing narrates as if she were telling a story in the 20th century, in her city of London, for example. The characters do and think like our contemporaries, but limited by the environment that surrounds them and the history that has determined that environment. In short, the story whose outcome is the life of each one of us.

The thematic axis may not be new: a society that tries to rebuild itself, the usual quarrels between prominent characters, the fight between good and evil, always subtly given by the elegant and austere pen of the author. The allegory about human nature and society is evident, but it does not become a moral nor does it pretend to be the central axis of the work. It is one more element, as Doris Lessing wisely knows. What is important is the story itself, and even above it, the quality of the characters. And they are primitive, envious, evil, innocent, resentful, kind, wise, generous. There is no end or conclusion. There is no war or thunderous end of fights and deaths. There is a peaceful but not happy ending, probably the inevitable consequence of a peace that is always threatened. This novel reaffirms the fact that the cycles of peace and war are the common factor in human life. The destroyed society that tries to survive, the children deprived of childhood, the child warriors and the female warriors are characters that we can also find in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, and this is the society that Lessing seems to prophesize after her long life witnessing the vicissitudes of the 20th century.

Another concern of the author is the past, the loss of knowledge that men achieved and has been lost forever. Recovering the past is a way of restarting the future. It is the same concern that we see in *Return to Innocence*. The future that she shows us is poor and violent, societies that have regressed and are trying to reorganize themselves in a similar way as we believe the first men did. If we want to draw any conclusion from this novel, which shares both tenderness and sadness, sarcasm and coldness, it is the eternal human paradox of man: one and his double (Dann the good and Dann the bad), good and evil (Mara and Kira), and the redundant cycles of peace and war, wisdom and folly, terrible and inevitable at the same time.

### *In Search of the Englishman* (1960)

Here we have another example of Lessing's versatility. Using the excuse of the essay, she creates, at 41 years of age, a novel that can be fully described as such. However, and strictly speaking, it should be classified within what are called memoirs. Halfway between essay and biography, it does not remain on these levels, but rather deepens the story, twists it without the reader feeling pain or effort, until it becomes a novel. The story is narrated in the first person, and we know that it is Lessing who narrates. It is not a diary, it is a long story, like someone telling an anecdote to their children or grandchildren, something that happened a long time ago.

The text begins as one expects from the comments on the back cover: a kind of essay on the peculiarities of the English citizen. The atmosphere is simple, the tone resorts to the typical presentation of this type of book. But

the first Englishman that the author describes is her own father, while the whole family still lives in Africa. Her description gives the first shock to any reader who does not previously know the author's work. She describes her father in a tenderly ironic way: in a mixture of admiration and fear, she fuses the reality of this rigidly English man with the daydream of a little girl who imagines her father as a crazy, prejudiced tyrant. Then we leave the continent to accompany Lessing on her boat trip with her little son Peter. We then have a couple of chapters where she tells us about the trip itself and the ups and downs of her temporary but extensive residence in the Cape waiting for the next boat that would take them to England. Already in London, she looks for accommodation and meets the first major character in this portrait of the English being; Bobby Brent or Mr. Ponsonby or Mr. MacNamara. We will never know his real name, But he is a swindler whose skill at deception is matched only by his charm at doing so. Lessing is almost self-consciously a victim of this man, but will not be fooled any more, simply playing along to see if she can get something out of it. Doris tries to make her way in post-war England, alone with a child, without her own home and with difficulties at work. She tries to write, but finds it almost impossible amidst all the complications. Finally she finds a boarding house where she is first rented an attic that barely fits her suitcases. Then she gets other more comfortable rooms in the same building, and here begins the real climax of the text.

The great majority of the work takes place in this boarding house, and it is an exact, solid, fluidly irritating description of its inhabitants. The owners, middle-class workers, mean, ambitious, ignorant, the roommate and friend of Lessing, Rose, disenchanted, somewhat hypocritical and confused in her approach to men, nostalgic for the time of war when for her there was more loyalty, more closeness, less complications. She knew that men died, that families suffered hunger, but she felt more secure in things and in the immediate world. We see other neighbors pass by, the Skeffingtons, a disaffected couple, with a sick daughter, a hysterical mother and a father who supports two families. The old people, previous owners of the house, with whom everyone has a relationship of perpetual war, and whose room is a den of dirt and carelessness. The house is an allegory of society, where meanness, prejudices, hatred and love coexist and are continually confused. Small tragedies occur, conflictive relationships between man and woman, mothers and children. A place where political grievances and resentments seep through, scarcity contrasts with excess obtained through trickery and deceit. It is a world that tries to survive no matter at the expense of what or whom. It is a post-war society, with all that means, but not far removed from any current situation. Because the emphasis is not placed exclusively on the consequences of a socio-political situation, but on how human nature adapts and reacts to it. The characteristics of man and woman emerge in this small society as they do throughout the city or the world. Towards the end, in the last three chapters, the tension increases, the cruelty is terribly lascivious, both in what is said and in what is not said. Because as we already said in another commentary on another

Lessing novel, the author's voice is casual, almost like hearing a tragedy in the voice of a passerby on the street. The voice is not cold but exact, and for that very reason hard and intensely sharp. It doesn't hurt at the moment, but later.

This is a novel, and the anecdote about the supposed essay presented at the beginning is only an excuse, a resource that enriches and confirms the complexity of the great Doris Lessing's vision.

### Innocence (1956)

Written at the age of 37, this novel has, like the vast majority of Lessing's work, a political theme. But classifications are misleading, the author knows it, and that is why her sensitivity as a writer and her intelligence as a narrator make her avoid any proximity to the pamphlet or the expression of ideas. Her narrative is not a political platform, not even of her own and exclusive thought on the subject, but an exploration of the soul of the man involved in active politics. At some point in the novel, the inspectors in charge of evaluating the application for naturalization of the main character as an English citizen, already retired from activity, ask him if his novel, since he is a writer, is political. He answers yes, as everything that concerns man is political, but at the same time he is a humanist. Then they ask him how, if his novel is about politics, he now claims to be apolitical. Lessing, as an activist first, as a thinker and as a writer later, knows that no matter how much man wants to distance himself from political events, everything around him depends on them, every political strategy adopted or to be adopted determines how we live, eat or love. We cannot distance ourselves from it, we can forget that it exists for a while, but it will take care of shaking us with the daily blows of reality.

The novel is simply about a conversation between an elderly writer, exiled, ex-communist, but who still preserves the original ideals, and a girl in her early twenties, a product of the generation that fought for the rights that she and her peers enjoy without knowing the effort that was required to obtain them. She is from a generation fed up with the politics that took time and life away from her parents, she is fed up with corruption and murders, and she does not. She wants to know nothing about that past that she has only heard about, and that she needs to get rid of. Julia, however, does not see much more in her future; without her immediate friends, without her relationships, she wanders alone at night, and her apartment seems empty and horrible. Her relationship with Jan is ambivalent; she is irresistibly attracted to that mixture of an experienced man, that mystery that he seems to hide, and at the same time she abhors that area that she knows she cannot penetrate because it belongs only to him, and she also hates those things and gestures that directly relate him to that past that

she wants to know nothing about. But Julia is stubborn; she will not admit to others that this same denial is defining her, in turn defining the relationship between the two of them. The clash between generations is another common theme in Lessing, we can see it in *The Good Terrorist*, but here the relationship is almost inverse, the daughter is the passive one, the non-activist. Julia's innocence in these matters, besides determining a naive attitude, is almost a guarantee of idealism, the same idealism that Jan has lost in the countless vicissitudes of his generation, but which he rescues when he starts talking about the past. Thus we learn about the incongruities of totalitarian regimes and the hypocrisies of the so-called democratic ones. The only thing worth saving for him seems to be the memory of his childhood, but even when the remains of this and of his native country, that is, when his only living brother comes to look for him, their exchange of opinions is irritating: everything for which he fought and had to go into exile has now become a transaction with the powers of the day, even old comrades have agreed to improve their pockets more than their virtues. It is a terrifyingly realistic novel, but told with Lessing's skill and bittersweet writing, which has accustomed us to telling us the most terrible things with common words, as if we were listening to the conversation of two friends having tea at five in the afternoon in a London garden. Lessing has the unclassifiable, almost impossible skill of dissecting, of speaking of the most gruesome things without mentioning them, but her style cannot even be classified as indirect, nor as dark. It is rather like the aforementioned, like listening to a conversation in the street between two people who talk about an accident and the dead involved. There is no premeditated irony, the irony arises from the tragic ridiculousness of this serene conversation, from this friendly exchange of words that involve everything, the past and the present, the reality concretized a few meters away in time or space, except the recognition of any feeling on the part of the interlocutors. Perhaps they will appear later, when they are alone in the realm of their homes and their solitary beds, but even there we all want to escape from that which harms us, even if without all that, we are nothing more than a particle floating in the future. Julia discovers this: the past is a food of inexhaustible source.

#### Memoirs of a Survivor (1974)

More a futuristic novel than science fiction, *Memoirs of a Survivor* is a complex narrative with multiple interpretations. There is a central character, a narrator, who writes in the first person, describing in principle two very different stories or situations. The first is the real one: a city victim of changing times in a society that seems to be disintegrating. The second, inside her house, is implicitly magical or imaginative, but it really happens to the protagonist: the interior wall of her house dissolves and reveals various things: rooms, bedrooms, people. In the first, another

character appears: Emily, a girl with a strange dog (a mix of a dog and a cat, with human attributes in its character), left there by a man. Interconnections then arise between both worlds: what is seen behind the wall are memories or images of Emily's life. In turn, the real part shows the life of the girl who is growing up, getting older, making contacts with the people on the street. Tribes are forming, clans that leave for better regions. Food is scarce, authority loses its presence. There are riots and murders that little by little are getting closer to that once peaceful neighborhood. It is a society that is devolving to a previous, more savage state. The first attempts at communes are reminiscent of a society that reminds us of the groups in *The Good Terrorist*, by the same author. We then have three very different spaces: the street, from which the protagonists must protect themselves; the house, where they take refuge; and what is behind the wall. Emily grows up and acquires leadership in the survival groups. But these groups are not made up of adults but of young people, and their members are increasingly children. Children then begin to be feared by adults, because they were born in a society without education. On or guide. The time of the novel, which is also the protagonist, does not follow the usual rhythm. Time moves quickly, as if we were seeing the events of a century or more in a few months. Emily is also divided between two worlds: her need to live outside the house, and her affection for the dog and its caretaker. The images that the protagonist sees behind the wall speak of Emily having a little brother that she had to take care of, and an overprotective and rigid mother. Here childhood is seen then as a prison, a punishment, a state of continuous need in search of freedom. The children in the underground go out and kill, they are primitive, and Emily feels that she must take care of them. Her boyfriend, Gerald, is another leader whose idealism seems to be a surviving trait from a distant golden age. The family formed by the protagonist, Emily, Gerald and the dog seems to be the unit that finally survives. The house and the wall as a saving imagination from the loneliness and reality outside. So we wonder: could it not be Emily who is telling us all this? Are these her memories? There is a constant back and forth between these worlds. The author does nothing more than project into separate spaces what each human being contains within themselves, the ambivalence of the environment and the interior. What we desire and what we must do. What we love and what we hate. Childhood and adulthood. The need to grow and the refusal to die. The novel gradually acquires a state of anguish and tension that is subtly managed. The degradation of the outside world, the transformation of the apartment building into a small city where communes and merchants live on the upper floors, and then these give way to wild clans who gather animals to sacrifice. It is a terrible, unprotected, threatening world, where only the wall that leads to the imagination, or to other better worlds, is the only salvation. Here we reach the crucial point: is it not all Emily-narrator's imagination? Are they not her memories? Isn't this lonely woman in a closed apartment, a survivor, the one who sees beyond the wall the world as it was and as it should be? Isn't she placing her hope there?

The elegance of the language, its subtlety, its exact measure of rhythm, makes the emotional, what is not said, stand out above the simple facts. Even the information of place or time, the summaries of previous events, which so often spoil or are superimposed in the so-called science fiction or futuristic novels, are at the precise moments of the narrative, like pieces of a puzzle. Doris Lessing wrote this novel at the age of 55, bringing all her expressive capacity to bear on a story that is at once allegory, futurism, philosophy, and also a cruel and accurate description of human nature.

### The Hunger of Jabavu (1953)

Published within a cycle of short novels under the general title of *Five*, this novel bears the original name of *Hunger*. The plot shows us a native of an African village on his journey to maturity in the city. Jabavu's hunger refers to his concern to improve his lifestyle. He is a teenager who is dissatisfied with the effort he sees his parents make for a life where there is only poverty and illness. He feels better and stronger than the others, and tempted by the stories told to him by those who come from the city, he decides to leave. Here we find a 34-year-old narrator who already demonstrates her multiple literary resources. For example, she uses a constant present tense, a difficult and risky resource for an extensive narration that reaches 172 pages; she also uses an indirect tone, where the dialogues are in quotation marks within the paragraphs. Even though the characters speak, the tone is quasi-literary and deliberately fabulous. All this gives the narration an air of contemporary fable, in keeping with the author's imprint, always concerned with social issues and more than anything with the human situation within the various societies, be it English, African or even of the immediate future. Reality gradually gains ground. As Jabavu goes deeper into the city, his beliefs are challenged by what he finds. He feels confused: the women he meets seem as stupid as those in his village, but he soon sees that they are more deceitful; he finds that anonymity is an accomplice to easy thefts of small objects, but he soon learns that he must have papers that identify him. Jabavu's hunger begins as a determinism (he was born in times of famine, where everything was used to eat, and this characterized his way of being as a child and as an adolescent: they called him "the big mouth", not only for eating everything, but for his way of criticizing and disobeying his parents), then it transforms into an immediate need to change, to look for other things. This also accentuates the allegorical air of the novel. That hunger, as a child, has This funny and strange character, as a teenager, makes him talk too much. He is strange to others, and this air of strangeness is a peculiarity that links this character with others who would later appear in the author's narrative (*The Fifth Son*, for example), but this similarity ends here. In the city he is no one special, although both the good and the bad see an important potential in him. Jabavu retains a certain naivety that is not

strong enough to prevail over his racial pride, or more than anything his personal pride. He feels stronger than others in the city, capable of greater things, and for this reason he opts for the quickest benefits. Despite meeting people who want to adopt him for a social cause, he decides to join a gang of thieves who will make him earn more money with less effort and time. The clash with the reality of the city shows the ambivalence of his spirit: childhood in the village is given almost as a daydream, not of pleasures, but of protection from all danger; The maturity is marked by disillusionment, the confusion of the reality that he finds in the city. Jabavu finds himself immersed in a plot that involves both obstacles and dangers arising from a corrupt, bureaucratic and discriminatory organization, as well as the eternal human feelings of jealousy and ambition. He finds himself in the middle of murders and the victim of extortion to rob the only man in the city who has believed in him from the beginning. Here the white man is nothing more than an organization without feelings that determines a very narrow way of life for the blacks. It is they who actively participate, then, in the lives of their peers, for better or worse. Jabavu is punished in the end, but learns that punishment is also a path to redemption through atonement. He learns, above all, his own shortcomings and limitations, his own weaknesses of character. The ending is neither happy nor tragic, but hopeful. The tone and style of the narrative are perfectly in keeping with the theme. It is not the narration of a naturalist author, nor a fable or moralist fable. The closest it could come to, if we want to classify it in some way, is an urban legend of the 20th century. A parable, perhaps?

### The Good Terrorist (1985)

This novel, published when the author was 66 years old, shows a writer in full and maximum expressive maturity. But it is not only in the grammatical and narrative structure where we notice this maturity, but in the human depth, in the understanding of souls that are very difficult to translate. Because translating is, perhaps, one of the ways of saying that the writer must delve into, explore, take notes and only then express what psychology, thought, feeling and the contradictory logic of human behavior are. In this novel we have a 36-year-old protagonist, single, almost certainly still a virgin, a political activist on the extreme left, who lives in the communes of London. For 15 years she has maintained a relationship that is not entirely precise but arranged with a homosexual man. In it we see the first ambivalence that dominates the novel: Alice takes care of the tasks of the houses they occupy on her own initiative and with pleasure. She is in charge of cleaning, cooking, maintenance, enabling public services, and dealing with the City Council. She has always done this and it does not bother her that the other members do not do it, or even that they underestimate these tasks and do not thank her for it. But she does not disdain purely political tasks either: she enjoys graffiti in the street,



demonstrations, and the danger that all this implies, she likes political meetings and decision-making. She takes control of everything "domestic", she is in charge of managing the money, and she does not spare any scruples in obtaining resources from anywhere. The character's ambivalence is not only in these domestic/political aspects, but in the moral sphere as well. She does not consider herself a thief, she does have scruples about stealing from people she does not know. However, when she steals money from her father's pocket, when she borrows from friends or relatives, accusing them of being bourgeois and fascists, when she steals carpets and curtains from her mother's house, she does not believe she is doing anything wrong: she does it for the "cause." If others are not willing to hand over what they owe of their own free will, she must take it from them. This reasoning is implicit in the protagonist's actions, in the thoughts that the author recreates indirectly. Here is Lessing's mastery: at no time do we find that the author is interfering or telling us something. Everything comes subtly from the plot and from the way in which the narrator envelops us in the precisely described environment. The secondary characters are skillfully defined: the lesbian couple, never with low blows, only with necessary notes to the story. The author describes the characters as being superficial and superficial, and then delves into the inner being of each one of them: the fragile Philip, a failed worker; Bert, the average militant who always plays secondary roles; Jocelyn, the cold militant who makes bombs, etc. All the characters could be listed like this, described without emphasis, as if in passing, as accurately as if we were seeing them leaving the neighbor's house. And it is this feeling that the author transmits to us: the militants are part of society, they are immersed in it and suddenly they jump out to reproach us for the countless defects that the rest of us allow out of convenience and ignorance. But in them there is also an essence that belongs to all humans. A dark factor that in their hands, due to the possibility of accessing weapons, due to the logic gained in the school of skepticism and nonconformity, can become a double-edged sword. It is here that we move on to another of the ambivalences of these beings: the personal is mixed with the political. To what extent is the desire for justice not also a personal search to resolve personal ghosts? What is the limit to seeking social justice? It is quite clear that there are no limits when what has been instilled in these minds is a determined end, that and no other. The destruction and construction of a new society is the declared objective of the protagonist herself, although perhaps she does not really believe in it. She seems convinced, but how far is she willing to go to see such an objective fulfilled?

The plot of the novel will lead her to find out. In the final attack she does not actively participate, but she is part of the plan, she has collaborated in creating it, she has provided the conditions so that it can be carried out. Her call a few minutes before to the authorities to report it is nothing more than an excuse to calm her conscience, silenced for so long by those domestic tasks that hid her true self: that we are all capable of anything, or at least tolerate and turn a blind eye to everything. What Alice is looking

for is a home. She misses her parents' house, the parties they offered. She repudiates the sale of the old house as if it had been hers, and it was, but in her memories. She is angry with her mother for having sold it, but she does not think that she did so because she and her partner have lived there without paying. Alice is still a child: her other ambivalence is sexual. Every time she hears her housemates making love, or the subject of sex comes up in conversations, she feels uncomfortable. She does not tolerate being touched, her relationship with Jasper is strange: she loves him but does not want him. She would like to leave him but does not dare: she knows that Jasper depends on her. It is almost a mother-son relationship. These parallels are not coincidental: politics/personal, love/sex, woman/marriage, house/shelter. Alice wants to destroy what she believes is trying to destroy her: society, but society is also within herself. Alice has the ability to understand everyone, they are surprised by her shrewdness. But she does not seem to understand herself, much less analyze herself or explain her actions. She has a certain innocence that seems more like obstinacy and clumsiness. Her confrontation with problems, the way she solves them without sparing the danger, gives her the virtue of courage. But it is an innocence of convenience, which when it clashes with individual responsibility, with mere respect for those who think differently, is not capable of justifying itself and reacts with violence. Everything is because of an objective, of the injustice of the established world. The rebuilt house is an allegory in turn of society and of Alice herself: everything looks better since she arrived, but the ceiling beams remain unrenovated, and are rotten. Roof/head? The house and those who live in it are also an allegory of the marriage she does not have: Alice is the head of the family, who repairs, fixes, solves and keeps the heat and food for when the others return from work (read "demonstrations").

Towards the end there is a violence that has been accumulating throughout the novel, which translates into the fact that the suffering of others (both victims and perpetrators) is not important, but the "cause". There are certain parallels with another magnificent novel by the author: *The Fifth Son*. If in this one we have a strange son that the mother comes to not recognize as her own, Alice's mother also does not recognize her daughter for what she has become. It is also peculiar that there is a distance that society (the supposedly "normal") creates around those who do not understand or think differently: the commune of militants, homosexuals like Jasper, extremists who ignore the laws of coexistence for the sake of an incorruptible objective. Inevitably, these must become strangers to understand their existence, and finally take the label of monsters for others. Perhaps, in this way, they see themselves as strangers. It is a kind of treatise on a marriage that is more accustomed than in love, and on the abysmal differences that are formed between the members of the couple and that they do not want or avoid facing head on. The woman, more settled and passive, the man who discovers a hobby, diving, which makes him recover the sensations of youth. *The Day Stalin Died* is another story where the political and the personal are mixed. Here the story is told of the

narrator's cousin, who must take some photos, and the conflictive relationship with her mother. Both turn out to be almost the same, hence the daily fights, but this relationship-symbiosis is only a background argument to show a contemporary situation: the day that this happens, news of Stalin's death arrives. Then, between the fights between mother and daughter, conventional and narrow opinions about the war and its leaders sneak in. Here Lessing dedicates herself to a cynical criticism of the opinion of the English middle class. *Wine and Him* are two short stories where the theme of the man-woman relationship predominates. Lessing's gaze is critical of both at the same time. There are no generalisations for her, but some of her characters show emotional ties that are almost impossible to break. When you have loved someone once, she seems to tell us, even if hate has succeeded love, the bond is still there, and it is a two-sided bond. What the woman says at the end of *Him* involves a whole philosophy that could encompass the customs of many centuries, and especially of the twentieth century: "If I want to keep it, I will never be able to say what I think, I will never be able to tell the truth." Or in *Wine*: "...And then she sank into sadness, until she was able to resist it, and a spark of cruelty was lit in him." *The Eye of God in Paradise* is an exceptional story. It begins as almost a story of an unfortunate journey of an English couple through German lands, with the usual economic hardships and lack of understanding of the German soul. Then it becomes almost an essay on the guilt or innocence of the people and their responsibility towards their leaders during the war. The couple, both doctors, meet a doctor who wants to win their favour in order to fulfil his wish to live in England or America. The story mixes reflections on the German soul and the punishment to which it is exposed by the rest of the world, while characters who represent or do not represent the true citizen appear. The couple goes from the verbosity of this fascist doctor, who later appears not to be so fanatical, to a friendly and down-to-earth hotelier who is desperate to serve them, because she considers the English superior. But the story takes another turn when the director of the institute they are going to visit appears. It is a psychiatric hospital, and the director is a peculiar being, who for six months of the year is confined to his own hospital. He receives them with great kindness, but does not seem too interested in showing off his scientific achievements. This man becomes enthusiastic when the couple show interest in the paintings he paints. They are strange paintings, with an evident polarity, some are dark and terrible, others show a beatific peace. Another peculiarity is that they can only be seen from a certain distance, from which only meaningless brushstrokes can be seen. When they finally agree to take a tour of the place, the couple of doctors see wards of men, women and children, isolated from each other, without any contact of any kind at any time. The adults seem to be suffering, the children are locked in straitjackets. The couple is horrified by this, and the director understands their point of view, but expresses his own: there are no cures, he says, why expose them to more suffering. The couple has heard that the doctor worked there during the war, and wonders if he

made concessions under the regime. The children's ward is their answer, there are all those who according to the law, should have been exterminated for their defects and deformities. It is a terribly beautiful story because of the stark cruelty with which it shows human nature. Every relationship is a death in itself, it is an inconsolable suffering; there is only, he seems to tell us, isolation and vegetative life as a symbol of a necessary survival. The following stories were taken from her book *A Man and Two Women* (1963). Here Lessing is already 44 years old, and she explores the multiple factors and characteristics of the man-woman relationship. In *Selected for an Interview* we have a failed writer turned journalist, who must interview a successful set designer and designer. The problem is that for him the interview should be nothing more than a sexual conquest, becoming over time a need to reaffirm his virility and personal attractiveness, superficial displays of an anguished and hidden inner need. For her, faced with the situation of accepting or being raped, she accepts the to run away with him in order to finish the matter once and for all. But he has not counted on this resigned indifference; for him a triumph would have been total resistance or total surrender. Finally, that obligatory formality that that night represented for her has already passed, turned into an annoying but laughable anecdote, it is for him an enormous and terrible humiliation. This story is typical of the way in which Lessing is able to show the harsh and complex relationships between a man and a woman, their double meanings: appearance and true feeling, need and repulsion, attraction and rejection. Love and sex seem to go along the same route but in opposite directions, susceptible to many other factors such as pride, resentment, the need for possession and contempt. A woman on the roof is another cruel example of the same theme. Three workers are carrying out their task on a terrace, and they see how a very beautiful woman is sunbathing on a neighboring roof. The story is a succession of reactions by three men: the excited and dreamy teenager, the married adult, attracted to the woman but reviling her for that very reason, the older, experienced man, who looks at all this with resignation and calm. Finally, we are shown how the woman, accustomed to these situations, to the harassment and stares of men, has adopted a general disdain towards all of them, but it is the boy who will be most shocked, because for him she is not only a woman he has dreamed of at night, but an ideal that after that day, he will have to take down from its high pedestal. *How I finally lost my heart* has a more poetic treatment both in language and structure. A woman tells of her experience with men, the way she met one and then left him for another. The peculiar thing is that her way of saying it is not sentimental, but almost mathematical at times, not cold, but analytical. But this treatment becomes a kind of nostalgic look and the allegory immediately takes place: her heart, in order not to suffer, must be torn out, wrapped in metal paper, and thrown away. The story takes an important turn towards the second half, when the protagonist travels by train and sees a woman talking to herself, blaming an imaginary lover. This is, then, the opportunity she finds to give away her heart. She wraps it in paper and leaves it on the empty seat next

to the upset woman. In *A Man and Two Women* the subject at hand is treated as cruelly as it is poetically. It is a subtle mixture of both the dissection of interpersonal relationships and compassion for human limitations and anguish. It deals with two very close-knit couples. In this case the woman whose husband is on a business trip visits her friend couple, who has just had their first child. She finds herself in a somewhat tense situation due to the housework and the feelings that the couple is suffering. The new mother has a sarcastic sense of humor, and forces her husband and her friend to talk about harsh topics, about the condition of women, men and human beings in general. They understand what she is going through, but it is still annoying and resentful. The subject of infidelity is exposed without any reservations, and what begins as a joke on her part, is concretized in the plane of desires between the husband and the friend. The situation does not go beyond that, a touch of skin, lips that brush a cheek, but the interrupted desire is like a stone that they will hardly be able to remove from each other's chest. *A Room* is a very short story where a woman visits a room, where after a detailed description of the place, she begins to see what is beyond time. It is not a fantastic story, but a mere daydream that inevitably reminds us of the room in a novel by the same author: *Memoirs of a survivor*. *England vs. England* changes the theme but not the fact of the conflict between two forces. In this case it is about the confrontation of two cultures or social classes within the same country. The son of a miner goes to study in the city. When he returns, he realizes that he is no longer like the others. Even his family, despite loving him, reproaches him for certain attitudes that he does not understand, and he can no longer stop seeing them as rhetorical characters full of moral and ancient hypocrisies. The second half of the story finds the protagonist returning and sharing the train with a country couple and a city girl. The conversation that ensues between them is ridiculously burlesque and insidious on the part of the boy, as if in this way he were taking revenge on his parents, who have turned him into someone superior but at the same time someone he has not asked to be. *Two Potters* is an especially poetic story. The dreamlike element is not an excuse nor the primary factor. The story is not the main theme of the story, but rather an instrument for subtle and delicate allegory, evident but never grotesque or forced. A writer tells her dream about an old potter to a friend, also a potter, but of a practical and skeptical nature. Slowly the friend lets herself be penetrated by this story of the dream, analyzes it and incorporates its supposed discrepancies into her own life. Why doesn't she create, she asks herself, a rabbit out of clay to make it a reality, just as the old potter did in the story. Dream and reality feed off each other, and the result is a symbiosis where the dream takes on a more concrete character than reality. *Between Men* takes up the usual theme, in the voice of two professional women, single, not committed to anything other than the partner of the moment. But both realize that their attitude is not very different from that of a womanizer who remains alone as the years go by. They are no longer young, but their physical appearance seems to improve when they have been abandoned or left

someone, because that is when they are available again and their beauty is highlighted, with the help of cosmetics and hairdressing. They know, however, that they must survive in a world of men whose advantage is that their bodies are not so much against them as they are, time does not spoil them too much, and young women, on the other hand, are attracted to them. They decide, then, to ally themselves and no longer fight each other for the same partners. The story is almost a conversation between two women who may be completely far from our experience and situation, but who under Lessing's gaze become absolutely understandable beings of flesh and blood, whether or not we agree with them and their character. In *Room Nineteen* we have a woman, wife and mother, apparently happy, but who at a certain moment begins to feel that something is not right. Not her husband, understanding and loving, of whom she may suspect some infidelity, but not of his love. She is not dissatisfied with her children or her way of life. She simply begins to feel that she needs to be alone. First it is a few hours in a room in her own house, then a hotel room where she will spend more and more time and more days of the week. Just to be alone. Her family does not understand her and believes that she is ill or has a lover. She lets them believe this. In a way, she is emptying herself of herself, she is stripping herself of her feelings until she feels that her chest is emptying, she must be so alone that even the idea of being with herself is not tolerable. The end is devastating. One of Lessing's most terrible and most beautiful, most precise and distressing stories, describing a soul conflicted with its own existence. In *Our Friend Judith* we find something similar, but less self-destructive. In this case, the woman also defends her individuality, to the point of stripping herself of all relationships that she does not consider absolutely sincere. With her, there is no hypocrisy or utilitarianism. The friendships that she tolerates are maintained for the same reason that she may have a lover, the transitory feeling, which can be interrupted when it ceases for an internal or external reason. Therefore, it is a chosen and accepted loneliness. Each one deals with the man/woman theme again, but this time it is a case of incest between brothers, conscious, accepted, and almost tolerated by each one's partners. Obviously, Lessing's delicate mastery takes us away from all obscenity or bad taste, leaving simply a sober and precise look at the case. *Homage to Isaac Babel* recovers the innocence of the gaze when it focuses on a teenager and her first love. It is a poetic, brief and beautiful story. In *Before the Ministry* we enter the world of men in politics. Lessing's pen, usually precise and sufficient in this field, addresses the conversations of these politicians describing a conversation prior to an extremely important meeting, their contradictions and their weaknesses. *Dialogue* narrates the visit that a woman makes to a man who is apparently imprisoned in a place. The place is not described as a prison or a hospital, and the atmosphere is ambiguously futuristic (as in *Two Potters*). This ambivalence contributes to the pseudo-philosophical climate of the dialogue between this couple, where they talk about God, man and death. The building that she enters shares a certain allegorical similarity with Kafka's *The Castle*, but it is only

a distant reminiscence. What is interesting is what it represents, a shadow that will follow the protagonist wherever she goes. Notes for a Historical Case describes a woman that we could call typical after women's liberation. Her beauty makes her worthy of certain privileges that she will know how to take advantage of both in her work and in her relationships. She will have the most attractive and rich young men at her disposal, and She can discard them at will. Her attitude is one of total disregard for the feelings of others, who are simply instruments for her own satisfaction. But as in many of Lessing's characters, this attitude does not represent malice or selfishness, only a kind of survival. Finally, she will fall victim to her own game by rejecting the least promising of her suitors, but also by risking, as in a game of chance, in a not entirely unconscious request for help, the security she saw in the richest and most promising suitor.

The following stories were taken from her 1972 collection: The story of a non-marrying man, and their common denominator is the tendency towards chronicle and analysis, but above all description, used as a narrative method. Along with the source she tells a story almost like an oriental legend, with the appropriate tone for it, between allegory and fable. An ordinary man, a jeweller, makes a rich young woman aware of her true value as a person and not as an object within a society that uses women as a commodity for exchange. Of course, the treatment is completely removed from any pamphlet or ideology, and the subtle, precise and measured poetry contributes to giving this story an atmosphere halfway between reality and legend. An extremely difficult method that Lessing handles with mastery, as we already saw in Two Potters. In An Unsent Love Letter the narrator is an actress with a career who tries to explain the difference between what is seen and believed of her as an actress, that is, the mask and the affectation, the promiscuity and the hypocrisy, with what she really is, a woman with an impossible, unconfessed love, which is, however, the food for her spirit and her performances. A Year in Regent's Park can be defined as a story, since there is no specific plot, but rather it is based on the description of the park through the changes throughout an entire year. Here the description fulfills the narrative function, with the park being the protagonist that changes, just like a real character, with sensations that we only know through their different manifestations of color and climate. The curious thing about Lessing is that this type of story always preserves a background that gives it a life of its own, making the reader intuit that the merely descriptive is only an excuse to transmit something deeper. The end of the story somehow confirms this, beyond the absolute enjoyment of the poetic nature of its creation. Mrs. Fortescue recounts the awakening not only sexually but also in maturity of an adolescent: the woman who rents the attic in his parents' house, and who until now he believed to be a lady as respectable as his mother, is in fact a prostitute. But this discovery involves not only an external aspect, but the discovery of his own dark corners, with the insinuation of incest. Collateral Advantages of an Honorable Profession returns to the subject of acting and the various personalities that an actor is capable of embodying, but which each one

takes as methods of life at each moment of his life. The peculiarity of this story is its structure: a mixture of chronicle where the narrator intersperses examples from other stories or related characters, where the names of the protagonists are arbitrary, baptizing them with examples as common as if they were just guinea pigs that she uses to demonstrate something. In *An Old Woman and Her Cat* we return to the most conventional tale to tell a story with social connotations. As always, the social aspect is anecdotal, even though it has ideological force, to transmit a life story that goes beyond even the particular, showing crudely but with enormous beauty the futility of human nature. *Lions, Leaves, Roses...* and *The Other Garden* are two descriptive stories where the apparent theme is the tour of a zoo in the first case and a garden in the other. The aim behind these stories is to talk about what is hidden behind what we see, another landscape, other animals, other times. *Report on the Threatened City* is a story that could be classified within the science fiction genre. It deals with the report of an extraterrestrial civilization on the reactions of the inhabitants of an area of the Earth that is about to be destroyed by a natural catastrophe. An excuse, as we will see, to talk about the peculiarities and conditions of humans in general. The result is masterful in itself, far from all the conventionalism of science fiction, demonstrating that in good literature genres do not matter. An unpleasant story takes up the subject of relationships between men and women, this time through a complex plot and a terrible crudeness. We witness a story of infidelities, some tolerated, others hidden, between the members of two friendly couples. These infidelities are the least of it. The story of Jack Orkney is a long story that tells the story of a left-wing journalist who suffers from the death of his father and the political, social and generational changes. But the main theme lies in the dreams he begins to experience after his father's death. This story has certain parallels with *Room Nineteen*. In this case, it is the point of view of a man, also with a happy family and personal achievements, but who begins to feel a kind of pain that he cannot define. His dreams about death disturb him, he begins to suffer from insomnia while his dreams do not abandon him, he feels isolated, misunderstood, judged by his activist friends, looked upon with pity and pity by his family. This man demonstrates the ambivalence of contemporary man, who moves between his individual and internal conflicts and the demands and problems of the world in which he lives. He would like to satisfy both, but he will emerge from this demand in failure and more confused, unable to resolve either level. Perhaps the most defining phrase of this is the following: "He felt again as if he were a threatened building, with the demolition crews at his feet." As with the protagonist of *Room 19*, what is mobilizing, what is strange, is not on the outside, but in his own interiority. In her case it was a kind of fear personified in an old man who appeared in her garden, in his case it is dreams. In both, the proximity of death, as a near possibility or as an anguish that brings despair. What saves Jack from suicide, as a man, since social gender differences are relevant, are the obligations of his job, but he knows that beneath the superficial world he



has chosen to survive there is another world that no contrary will will prevent him from exploring one day. The last two stories are from 1992 and 1994. The Italian Sweater tells of a couple whose members discover, separately, the desires and dreams that their common lives will prevent them from fulfilling. It is not only a story about social nonconformity, but also about existence, the ambivalence inherent in every human being, the unhappiness underlying every happy situation. Reflections on an Almost Human brings us the voice of a Yeti or "missing link." This creature recounts his incursions into a human community of ordinary men and women, and then his return to his peers. Over time, he realizes that he no longer belongs to either community, because his own no longer suits him and he will never be able to fully belong to his adopted one. This story, like many of Lessing's stories and novels, deals with various topics: the reaction to what is different, social (or generational) gaps, the feeling of something internal and certain, incontestable, that cannot be evaded, something, like a pain, that can save us definitively if it does not destroy us first.

#### Cerco de tierra (1965)

The fourth novel in the cycle dedicated to the character of Martha Quest, here we find the protagonist at 24 years of age. She is already fully dedicated to her task as a political activist in left-wing groups. She is married to Anton Hesse, a German Jew who has fled from Nazi persecution, but it is a marriage of convenience so that Anton can obtain English nationality. Martha's father, in turn, is very ill and soon to die. Martha's daughter is now five years old, lives with her father, who has remarried, and visits her maternal grandparents when Martha is not there. Everyone agrees that it is not good for the child to know that Martha is her mother, and she calls herself aunt. Martha's mother tends to sow remorse in her daughter's mind, so Martha has mixed feelings about her own daughter. She knows that when she decided to abandon her she did so to leave her free of the influence, good or bad, that parents exert, but at the end of this novel she is not sure what her true feelings were, and what her current ones are in relation to her daughter. Her own relationship with her mother, so chaotic and conflictive because of that barrier of conventionalisms and hypocrisies that she finds in old Mrs. Quest, confirms it in her behavior. But Martha is a woman who is maturing, and the very fact that she is considered a member of the old activist guard by the new members of the left, demonstrates a parallel growth, both emotional and physical. In this novel, we find a Martha more settled in her feelings. Her desires, although contradictory, do not disturb her too much. She is married, but she considers Anton not to be her husband, and the men she frequents for her business are potential lovers she has to choose from. She eventually falls in love with him. Thomas, the only man she considers her true love until that moment. Here we see a more relaxed Martha, immersed in a more intense

situation but which she accepts with maturity, and with cynicism as a weapon of protection. Interpersonal relationships are treated here without half measures or false moralism. Marriages of convenience are friendships without setbacks, and their members are free to have lovers. Working couples are exposed to sporadic sexual relations without implying any commitment. This situation is confronted with the rigid social laws of the colony, in the hands of the old generation, of which Judge Maynard and his wife are its main representatives. And this point leads us to talk about the social situation, as a scenario within which all these characters move. The war has ended, and it is no longer, as in the first two novels, something that happens far away and from which governments and large companies obtain benefits, but a set of statistics confirmed by the dead who return. There is a bitter taste in the meetings of the activists, many of them ex-combatants. The old ideology is tinged with cynicism and disillusionment, only to return armed with the force of irony and an exacerbated cruelty. There are clashes between socialists and communists, especially in the way of facing the future between old and new comrades. For the first time, the efforts of the left see results in the beginning of a strike in which the trade unionists force the Kaffirs or black natives to join. The white and black leaders of these groups are continually changed by personal interests, whose cause is the search for power rather than the interest in the welfare of the African natives. Disillusionment with the corruption of communism in Russia causes the followers to shift their focus to the new zone of influence: communist China. As we see, political ideals fall and are raised again in other places or scenarios, with new people to believe in them. Meanwhile, Martha, personally, receives the news of the death of Thomas and her father. Then comes Anton's naturalization and the subsequent divorce. Then it is time to travel to England, an old dream of Martha's.

This novel surpasses the previous ones in the poetic treatment of its language. It contains some of the most beautiful fragments written by Lessing, more emotional within her usual terse, distant style. These moments are when she talks about her memories of her father's farm, his death, the results of the war, love in general, and above all the sea. Because for Martha the sea is the means of liberation by which she will reach England. Dreams are important in this novel, both prophetic (when she dreams of Thomas's fate and death) and expressions of desire (the sea and England). Here, Lessing masterfully combines the personal with the collective. One of the final episodes, the impending strike and the collective hysteria of the whites, shows with only what is necessary the frustrating situation of the colony, the segregation and the almost indestructible barrier of racism. Lessing achieves an exact balance between Martha's personal actions and emotional formation with the growth of social conflict. As if in both there had been something that needed to be expressed and explode. In Martha, love achieves its expression in an intense but balanced way, in the colony the human conflict for freedom and ideals breaks its limitations and will show itself from now on, with violence. Martha knows, as Thomas told her before dying, that the war has never ended.

Hector Tizón

## Complete stories

Tizón has published five collections of stories. The first of them dates from 1960, when he was 31 years old, with the name *A un lado de los rieles*. These sixteen stories are mostly short texts, of an exact measure for the effect they want to convey, a tight language and an established literary style. Their themes are strong, such as death linked to murder as an instrument of human passion or as a resource by a military political power (*Gemelos*, *Ahora te toca a ti*). The author's approach is neither consistent nor descriptive. He limits himself to showing the facts without accentuating the already cruel tones. There is no coldness in the language, because it is made up and colored with the slight effects of the setting and the exact description of the characters. In these stories there is a pathetic look at defenseless beings, both physically and mentally (*Fuegos artísticas*, *El hijo de Beelcebú*), there are stories of enormous tenderness full of poetry (*El circo*, which is in line with the tone of *Tini* by Wernicke and *El hombrecito de los azulejos* by Mujica Láinez; and *El llamado*).

The second book, published twelve years later, in 1972, at the age of 43, he wrote *El vactancioso y la bella*. In this book the author gains ground and we find greater development in the stories. A style is maintained and the expressive quality is preserved intact, but the plots are more complex, more developed, and therefore we see a greater use of both the richness of the theme and the author's narrative skill. The story that gives the book its title is one of Tizón's best. Here we see these ambiguous characters whose origins we do not know, who appear in a town to change the routine life of its inhabitants. Then they will leave, but leaving their mark and their mystery, their legend, which will be the subject of oral stories until long after their departure. The important thing, in the end, is not the exact and perfect plot with that twist at the end, but that this narrative arrangement is completed, complemented, to be more exact, by the painting of the characters, never completely defined, drawn as delicately as in calligraphy but maintaining indefinite areas, not completely said, deliberately hidden but not deceptively. How far to tell, the author asks himself when he writes, to say what is necessary like a bridge that the reader does not realize he is crossing, until he sees with his own means what the author has hinted at, has allowed him to build by giving him the necessary elements. The painting of characters is a strong feature in Tizón, they have the precise measure for their definition, he neither exaggerates nor lacks what is necessary. In *The World*, an old music box that has to sing, we find a serious of men in a bar in a provincial town, where each one lives in his

own world, until their destinies intersect in a tragically beautiful and sad ending, where failures do not constitute a lost ending, but a more poetic variation of their lives. In *The Indians* the theme of the past and childhood appears (already in the first book with the first story, *Light and Warm, Like a Dream*, the past is a predominant theme in Tizón's narrative, and later it will take almost exclusive control in his stories). This is a strange story, which leads us along fantastic or cruel allegorical paths (allegory in the style of Buzzatti and Kafka colors the short stories in the first book) and then changes towards other dreamlike paths, no less unconscious in reality, nor less disturbing. It reminds us of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In *The Cat* there is a similar treatment, which seems not to be quite the case: is the wild animal that kills children such or is it simply the cat whose kittens the protagonist has killed, and who then escaped, resentful?

In his third book of short stories (*The Venerated Traitor*), from 1978 and at the age of 49, he confirms his expressive resources and takes them to their maximum development. The stories are very varied in theme but return to the same habitual items, human passions, crime, political power. The landscape here is the protagonist not in itself, but as an identification with the characteristics of the characters. If in his last book of short stories the past and the present are the common feature, in this one the place and the characters constitute the same entity. The plots are ambiguous and precise at the same time, even avoiding, if we want to be strict, certain arbitrariness that the short stories of the first book fell into. There are no allegories, but the overwhelming weight of the facts, whose aridity, like that of the landscape, is as poetically terrible and beautiful as the landscapes. The characters seem to be predestined not so much by the past, but by their own personalities. Each one follows a path from which he cannot escape, usually sad and with failures that lead to tragedy. But the author's compassion for his characters is not in the gaze, austere and precise, necessarily cruel, but in the way he translates their interiority, with a language bordering on the poetic.

Tizón published a collection of his previous stories in 1984, *Recuento*, a los 55 años, adding three new stories. All three are practically dedicated to the subject of the military dictatorship, but without falling into easy thinking or political literature. In one, there is a married couple waiting for a call from their missing son; in another, a boy from the provinces searches for a distant relative in a city dominated by a feeling of persecution and paranoia; and finally, a university professor hunts himself down when he finds himself pursued by threatening forces.

In the fifth book of stories, *El gallo blanco*, written in 1992 and at the age of 63, we find the same quality and the same style as in the others, but the development of the themes is even more complex and profound, delving psychologically into the framework of the events. The actions have their own explanation, their own sick logic, their own altered growth. The past gains importance, until it takes on the same level of importance as the

present. The past and the family is the thematic pair par excellence in this collection, the climate of the stories is the place where they occur and the family that stars in them, both cannot be dissociated, space and time are the same substance. The family is both a memory and a current state of uncertainty and confusion: it has no present meaning other than in its relationship with the past. The story *Portrait of a family* is the typical example of this framework. The secondary themes are the rigid social conventions and the passions that try to break these limits. In turn, derived themes appear such as urban or rural rites, for example hunting and mourning in the story *The hunt*, a story extraordinarily narrated in two parallel stories, perhaps Tizón's best story. In *The white rooster* the theme of superstition and the rites of life and death are dealt with, taking the language and the structure in a confusing and dreamlike form, where the past returns and mixes with the present to the point that both are one and the same indiscernible thing. We are the past, and we must live with it, the author seems to tell us. We can never get rid of it, not even oblivion is able to erase its traces.

Thomas Mann

*Man and Dog* (1918)

This book could be considered a minor work by Thomas Mann, if by minor we mean not something of poor literary quality, but of more limited pretensions. With the rigor and elegance typical of Mann, the author has decided to tell us his impressions and feelings regarding one of his dogs, in this case a retriever. His rhythm is pleasant, his humor is tender and intelligent at the same time, his vision is nostalgic and tender. The theme serves to reflect on the relationship between men and animals and from there extrapolate it to their relationship with nature in general, and the use that man makes of natural space. The relationship is harmonious, he seems to conclude, as long as extreme and survival situations do not arise on either side, of course. Hunting is not justified in any way, and even the slight wild traits of the dog when hunting partridges clash with the author's sensitivity. However, there is a hint of nostalgia for a time and a place that time and progress will slowly destroy: aristocratic families and the serene patience of peasants. These themes, so dear to the author, are glimpsed in the walks he takes with his dog. It is a genre that cannot be classified as either an essay or a memoir, perhaps simply an apparently trivial story, like a mental break, a work that is only slightly easier among other great works. A work in the form of reflection and commentary, but not for that reason lacking the typical lucidity of Mann.

As a postscript, I mention a similar book by Manuel Mujica Lainez: *Cecil*, where the structure is practically the same and the result equally endearing, except that in this case it is about a greyhound and the anecdotes are more related to the vision of art than to nature. Are they not the same, then, from the perspective of man? Are their relations not reciprocal? Man, removed from nature, is left with art to interpret and recreate it.

From the Brood of Odin (Compiled by Katharina Mann, 1952)

These stories by Mann are astonishing. The characters mostly struggle with themselves rather than with their fellow men. The cause of this is the classic dichotomy between art and life. The protagonists feel cut off from the world, and the most terrible thing is that the more they try to resemble others, the more different and ridiculous they become. The feeling of isolation is therefore inevitable and irremediable. Some decide to survive in the cruelest way (thus showing the side that, according to Mann, moves and rectifies the world, giving it life) as in the story *From the Brood of Odin*; others continue to bear their failure, like Tonio Kroger (related to *The Buddenbrooks*) or the character in *The Clown*; Some choose suicide, as in the impeccable story *Little Mr. Friedman*. In *The Wardrobe* he delves into the fantastic in a splendid way. In *The Big Fight*, a character from Tonio Kroger, Herr Knak, reappears, a somewhat ridiculous character who also has to cope with being different and surviving in society by means of small battles. The theme of ambiguous sexuality is glimpsed in *Of the Brood of Odin* and in the character of Knak, which is in keeping with that intermediate zone where the characters move without ever feeling comfortable. In short, these stories speak of human beings and their deepest conflicts that are irreconcilable with a happy life. The dichotomy may be art/life, it occurs to me that it may be individual/community. Barriers that are almost always insurmountable.

*The Buddenbrooks* (1902)

*The Buddenbrooks* is perhaps the first great novel of the twentieth century. It tells us about a family from the previous century in the course of the last century. The novel is fifty years old, but unlike what Dickens or Jane Austen might do, its treatment is not contemporary to what it narrates, and therefore its vision is close to the family chronicle and saga, which have been so sadly abused later, with serials and soap operas. Let us say that it is the first great novel of the bourgeois and merchant class family, elevated in its prestige by rapid rise and commercial success. To this first element

the much-mentioned law of evolution is applied, in the face of the Germans of the first half of the century. That is to say, the purity of distinction is degraded with time. The generations wear out, and just as there are worthy and strong examples in a family, there are also stragglers, fools or failures. This does not clash with another thematic line of Mann: the art/life dichotomy, which in the case of the Buddenbrook brothers is given as practicality and commerce/art or indefiniteness, and also health/illness. But like every age, or organic and biological being, there is a period of prosperity, and as Thomas Buddenbrook rightly says, illness is already brewing when health is at its peak, like those stars whose light we see in the sky but which have long since died. The social theme is represented by the rise and recognition that commercial success always has above other more essential or profound considerations: the title of senator can be achieved simply by merits of commercial skill or factors of apparent personal and family decency. The theme of the workers' revolution is present in a few pages but does not succeed in knocking down the solidly founded building of this family.

The final bastion of the Buddenbrooks, Hanno, is a typical Mann character, physically weak, he lives in constant fear of life: school and his classmates, his father's opinion, all of this represents demands that he knows he cannot meet. His night visions are strange, the scene of the grandmother's funeral, feeling that this body seems like a wax doll that has replaced her, is a classic thought of these characters. Only music seems to make him happy, and yet he knows and we know that he will not excel in this field either. For him it is just an instrument, a language that helps him understand what others cannot explain to him.

The character of Antoine Buddenbrook is the counterweight, tragic and childish at the same time, representing a greater strength than that of the men in the family, if by strength we mean the ability to bear tragedies and disappointments as things that simply happen and remain in the past. The men in this novel are sadly nostalgic and conflictive, the women more practical but no less deeply rooted in tragic sentiment. This novel is effective, despite the relative immaturity of certain themes that are later better developed (as in *The Magic Mountain*), because of the symbiosis between characters, ideas and events: the characters are the environment, the events they carry out and their own thoughts at the same time. This, it seems to me, is the primordial basis of any novel that aims for excellence.

### The Magic Mountain (1924)

The Magic Mountain is not an easy novel to read. At least not for those who are only looking for entertainment, a quick read or continuous action. It is a novel of characters and atmospheres, of ideas above all, and not only

those that are expressed, but those implied by the plot. A young man goes to visit his cousin in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the high mountains. He goes with the plan to stay three weeks, simply out of courtesy and because his doctor recommended it so he could rest. But no more than a day after his arrival he begins to feel certain weaknesses, certain symptoms that do not worry him but that increase his discouragement. The reader senses something, he feels that those three weeks will be many more. In the manner of a chronicle, the author dares to get involved in certain passages: the objective is perhaps twofold, at least at first glance: to lighten the dense atmosphere by alternating the point of view, and also to say that nothing of what is narrated is of his exclusive invention, that everything has a basis in reality, but that at the same time it cannot be corroborated. Because what happens in that place in the high mountains is in the hands only of those who have visited it. It is not fantastic literature, and yet there is a cloud of ambiguity that invades the atmosphere of the novel. Something like what Castorp feels when he arrives. The air to which he must get used, the capricious changes of the climate, the snow in the middle of summer and the heat in winter, the copious and exaggerated meals, the cures in the cold on the balconies, the contradictions of the treatments, the curious characters that surround him, like caricatures of real beings. There the death of the sick is ignored, the bodies are removed at midday, while everyone eats, the They affect the rooms and no one mentions it even though everyone knows it. Is that place like death? Maybe. There is freedom and free will there, there are no responsibilities, and no one is forced to stay. As one of the doctors says, death and birth are not part of life, because we are not aware of them. We come and go from a void that we do not know.

It is a place to escape from the responsibilities of life, it is to enter life when we realize that death is near. Illness, the novel tells us, is a spur to the body, it makes it live. Who is completely healthy, physically, mentally or emotionally? Our state is a delicate balance between multiple factors, we are a machine permanently affected by thousands of threats and attacks. And sometimes that machine gets tired of defending itself.

The Magic Mountain develops some themes already seen in *The Buddenbrooks*. There are some passages that coincide in their similarity and intention, for example in the funeral of Hanno's grandmother and the funeral of Castorp's grandfather. In both cases, the child is struck by the body of the dead man as if it were a doll that has replaced his relative. Hanno and Castorp also have similar experiences of the passage of time: one during his vacation on the beach, the other during his first weeks of stay in the sanatorium. This leads us to talk about the theme of time, central to the development of the novel. Time is discussed through the characters and the author himself. Time is not an exact measurement, but rather a purely particular sensation, and it includes not something as elusive and uncertain as the passage of hours, but time as an awareness of fundamental changes in people, and not so much in things. Illness as a



sensation of state rather than a set of signs and symptoms, like fever, so recalcitrant to being understood or valued according to its real causes. The only real thing on this mountain is that one day we are here and the next we have disappeared for those who remain. Illness or life are habits, and we get used to both. There is no state to which we do not submit with the passage of time. Another duality is expressed in the characters of Settembrini and Naphta: in the first the idea of progress and science, of enlightenment and positivism; in the second the idea of religion as an absolute foundation, the rigidity of ideas and obscurantism. Two positions that bring together most of the social and philosophical conceptions of man. Two attitudes towards life and death.

Castorp's love for Claudia is complex. Like all love, it is an idealism. He recognizes aspects in Claudia that disconcert him, but his love is maintained and preserved from reality by the memories of the love he conceived since childhood. The duality of love: real and imaginary at the same time. Love lasts because it has been preconceived, because of beauty superimposed on the reality of reason. Love for another is also love for oneself. A man loves a woman and in turn loves the man who is in that woman. There are certain homosexual traits implicit in the characters: Castorp, Ziemssen, Krokowsky. There are few marriages mentioned, and there are disagreements or indifference in their members. Promiscuity is tolerated but not mentioned, as is death, whose after-dinner topic is not well regarded. Perhaps Castorp's illness allowed him to find love, but also death, because love hurts us, as does illness, and both make us aware of life. They make us fear the loss of what we cling to.

This novel of almost 1000 pages is an allegory of the world, a symbol not of life, but of our idea of life. Time passes sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly, there is humor and there are fragments of terrible beauty and poignancy. The spiritualist session where Castorp calls the spirit of his dead cousin, constitutes the emotional climax of the novel.

The Magic Mountain is fiction and philosophy at the same time. An amalgam like man, unfathomable in its multiplicity, profound in its emotional and artistic achievements, inconclusive in its answers to life's questions. It generates more questions than results, but it makes us aware, like illness, of that fear that only the contemplation of something beautiful can make tolerable.

Jonathan Franzen

Temperate Zone (2005)

This text by Franzen is not a traditional story or tale. It was published in an anthology of essays by young authors, and it is not an essay per se. The thematic axis is the following: the narrator, a ten-year-old boy, tells of a family fight between his older brother and his father. Between the departure from his brother's house and his return, the author goes on to describe his childhood, closely related to reading the comics of Charlie Brown and his dog Snoopy. He talks about the author of the comic and his childhood similar to that of his characters, speaking of how American society, immersed in the harsh reality of hippies, the social revolution and the Vietnam War, had found these comics as a means of mass entertainment. Not as a means of escape, but as the author says, a form of refuge and hope, because in comics even anger is funny and insecurity is worthy of love. Because everything can be resolved in a few frames, and life is less terrible if seen from another point of view. Childhood is a space of many fears: fantasy is a double-edged sword, it makes us build and destroy. What we touch can easily be undone, and fear comes from that: the fragility of things. Never again will we be so sensitive to these daily disappearances and deaths as in childhood. And the author feels guilty about many things: about what he did and didn't do. And this guilt is transferred to adulthood, when we are parents. Hence the rigidity of parents. Family quarrels that arise from small nonsense become enormous conflicts because each word is capable of hurting more than the last, and sometimes the wounds are irreparable, only covered up to forget them for a while. Humor is there to save situations: when we are able to laugh at ourselves, when someone makes a joke to us after a fight, that is not triviality, but a less difficult form of reconciliation. This is what Franzen tells us, eager to tell us about family conflicts, acutely shrewd in this matter, as he did with *The Corrections*, although in the novel there is no possible reconciliation between the members of the family, resentment and differences are only covered with blankets of everyday situations that seem to have the simple purpose of not touching the wounds so as not to remember that they are still there.

### *The Corrections* (2001)

An elderly father in progressive deterioration due to a neurological disease. A mother with inflexible ideas and notorious foolishness. Three children: one a failed teacher and writer, who is trying to make corrections to an unpresentable play; another successful in business and with a family, but unhappy with having fulfilled what others expected of him; the daughter, of uncertain profession, successful as a chef, but ambiguous and disoriented in her sexual preferences.

Enmities between the brothers, submission and nonconformity of the sister towards them, conflictive relationship between the daughter and the mother, obsessive relationship between the daughter and the father,

disappointment of the mother regarding her children, lack of understanding between the married son and his wife, demands of the son towards the parents, reversal of roles. All this enumeration, which could be substantially increased, are only names that try to classify what happens in this family. What happens in the middle is time and memories of childhood: images of the father, proud of his work and his ideas, the image of the mother, dedicated to the task of raising children and taking care of the home, with no other option, the games between siblings who slowly drifted apart as pride invaded daily quarrels. The frustrations of growing up are inevitable, as are the processes of blaming those who raised us at some point. Good or bad, this is the process of living together in an ordinary family. It could be anyone's, in any field or circumstance. Because it is not only about motives or actions that mark us and cause the effect, that is, the personality of each person in the family, but the intimate individual and incommunicable feelings of each member. How to force the formation of ties when there are scissors that suddenly appear at hand, how to force the coexistence of people with the same genes but so different from each other. Maybe the same reject each other, like the image in the mirror that can never be crossed. Resentments build up and tolerance gives way and gives in. Sometimes it gives way to a resentment very similar to hatred. But people die and the survivors remember, and even that memory is lost along with the love or resentment we have felt for them. It is always too late, it seems to me, to repent, there is always a guilt that remains. The survivors then change, like the mother when her husband dies, a harsh truth: those who left can no longer hurt us.

Impeccable treatment of characters, exquisite language, narration that never wanes in attention and poetry, despite the fact that they are only the daily adventures of an ordinary family. Human depth and extreme lucidity in the treatment of the point of view of each character. Franzen is each one of them, from a sick old man to a lesbian. This novel is an x-ray of the contemporary middle class and an exhaustive analysis of the human condition.

Tobias Wolff

Hunters in the Snow (1981)

First book of short stories by American writer born in 1945. These stories cover a fairly wide range of characters: there are university professors, students aspiring to university, truck drivers out hunting, a random couple who look at the neighbor's house as if it were their own, another couple celebrating their golden wedding anniversary on a cruise, a Vietnam veteran. What these characters have in common is a certain characteristic

that marks their lives at some point, not tragically, but so silently that they don't even realize what they've done. Because we can't say that things have happened to them, but that they have opted for them at some point, like someone squashing a cockroach in the kitchen. We all do it to live better, to survive the degradation that begins to accumulate at every moment if we're careless. And if we're not the ones who kill, someone else will do it to us. This has a parallel with the story of the Vietnam veterans (Wingfield), although in this story survival occurs through unexpected and non-violent channels: how the laziest and most imbecile soldier has managed to survive when others, more intelligent, did not. In the city and in everyday life, we all perform similar feats, but always at the expense of others: in *The House Next Door*, the protagonists have pity on the neighbor's abused wife until they see how she and he then kiss shamelessly and obscenely, then pity no longer takes place, but disapproval. *Hunters in the Snow* is a more gruesome story, where the tragedy that occurred becomes a quasi-comedy when those who must take the wounded man to the hospital stop at every bar along the way to warm their bodies with beer. In *Earthly Goods* we have a character that we usually call a "loser," one who wants to do things right, one who is content with his word, who is stubborn in his principles or wants to think well of others, who is ridiculous and pedantic in the face of general mediocrity, and finally becomes the object of bitterness and the target of unscrupulous people. The elderly couple in *First Voyage* celebrate their golden wedding, the celebration of which is only a reason for the already intuited mutual disappointment to emerge, in a silent way and without anyone being willing to recognize it. The academic environment is perhaps the least violent but perhaps for that reason the most severe of these cases: students who betray their companions to obtain the advantages of a friendship that will help them make a career, professors who humiliate a candidate for a position to comply only with the regulations. And this last story, *In the Garden of the American Martyrs*, is at the same time the most expressively bloody and at the same time the most poetic. The final speech of the aspiring teacher is very beautiful and moving. This poetry prevails in *Poaching* and *The Liar*, in both the family and childhood point of view expresses the fears and the terribleness of growing up and living together. Unlike another great dissector of the current middle class, Jonathan Franzen, Tobias Wolff, at least in these stories, gives a more hopeful vision. For him, he seems to tell us, sometimes there is conciliation.

Gustave Flaubert

Madame Bovary (1857)

What are the elements to build a masterpiece? Most of the time they emerge in the least expected way, looking for something else, having in mind other less pretentious objectives. Flaubert had proposed to write about a subject that he really despised: to reflect the mediocre mentality of the provincial middle class. To do so he used simple language to finally obtain a best-seller. He resorted to melodramatic effects and resources that he believed would guarantee mass reading. The result, although it was as he had expected in terms of the work itself, had very different repercussions and was not related to the quality of the work. There was scandal, criticism and flattery in equal measure; there was, in the end, a best-seller. Flaubert resorted to a melodramatic plot very typical of the 18th century novel, he used structural resources that border on parody at times, and a very direct language for the fashion of the time, where the author practically disappeared in the continuous actions of the characters. The descriptions are limited and slightly sensitive, and there are almost no comparisons. There are scene jumps that startle the reader, and everything is permanent action. Everything arises from the climate and the environment. But the main achievement is to have so subtly outlined the psychology of the characters with such scarce resources.

Emma Bovary is the first and foremost of the typical Flaubertian characters: she is the one who does not know how to place herself, finally, in any environment. She is lost, because in reality she may not know what she wants, because when she thinks she has obtained it, she is not happy. Typical allegory of life, existential philosophy hidden in the capricious and mediocre mood swings of a French provincial woman in the middle of the 19th century. Emma has brought on her tragedies, she has been bad to her husband, she has been deceived by her lovers, but Emma is lost in her own body. Her mind dreams of the bourgeois novels of the previous century, just like Don Quixote in his chivalric novels. She seeks and aspires to another world, like Quixote, but while he wants to serve others, she wants to make a profit. She cares little for others, and if she has married, it is because they did not see anything better in their provincial future.

Is Bovary as stupid as he seems, to the point of ridiculousness? In much of the novel he seems that way, he does not even have a true vocation as a doctor to justify it. He has studied medicine just as Emma has married, almost by the inertia of life.

Everyone pretends in Madame Bovary. She pretends to be better, always, he tries to conform her, Emma's lovers seek the benefits of lust the first, and of sentimental education, the other. The characters suffer, suspended in a misty environment. They cannot see beyond the length of their arms. In the last chapters, after Emma's death, the climate of the time stands out. The individual has become increasingly lost and blurred throughout the novel. They are lost, but society grows, represented by the pharmacist, who seems to survive and triumph over all contingencies, even the failure that Bovary endured. He is an apothecary, practices medicine illegally, writes

the town newspaper, makes political transactions and deals with the power of the day. The Bovary family quickly dies out, as if absorbed by a society that does not tolerate passivity and doubt, the daydreams of a decadent world.

In Chabrol's excellent film, the novel is followed to the letter, except for the last two chapters. Faithful to his style, Chabrol puts emphasis on Emma's personality: each individual builds his own end, that is what his films always tell us. That is why Bovary's personality loses some of its significance: in the novel he discovers his wife's infidelity, and yet he insists on not believing. Despite everything, his soul and his conscience remain faithful to the memory of Emma. This raises him above the ground on which he has been crawling throughout the text, because he is capable of forgiving and loving, his naivety takes on more sublime overtones. There is not even talk of forgiveness, but of his unwavering faith in his wife.

Flaubert wrote this novel at the age of 36.

### Sentimental Education (1869)

Here Flaubert analyses another of his typical characters, those who come from the provinces and aspire to make their way in Paris, to have a countess as their mistress and to make a fortune. The problem is that Moreau has no skill in doing so. Things go wrong for him, he does not know how to move or to carry out well-planned tricks to profit. He also falls in love with a woman married to a businessman who, throughout the novel, will gradually decline financially. That love is the only thing he respects, the only thing that finally seems to redeem him. But as in all of Flaubert, the intentions and psychologies are ambiguous. There is not, as in *Madame Bovary*, a climate of tension and imminent tragedy. Here everything develops within everyday habits, but no less petty and mediocre. Moreau reveals his petty and opportunistic nature, his best friend tries to take advantage of what Federico seems to put aside at times. Three women are interested in Moreau, but none is really in love with him. The only one whose virtue seems invulnerable is the married middle-class lady, and yet that virtue is fictitious in many parts of the novel. As in *Bovary*, everyone pretends in their own way. No one is spared from a certain hypocrisy, perhaps the price we all pay to survive in society. In one fragment, Flaubert reflects through his character, and says that there is always something that is hidden even from the most loved ones, even in a couple there is something that is not said so as not to hurt them, and not to feel hurt in turn.

In *Sentimental Education* the social and political framework is relevant, without overshadowing the personal development of the protagonists, it is more a framework that accompanies and affirms the characteristics of their

actions. As if saying that the betrayals of a revolutionary era are similar to the relationships between men and women. Nothing is different in human nature, whether in the political or sentimental sphere. It is known that Flaubert was somewhat distrustful of the social changes proclaimed by the proletariat, not because he defended an extreme conservatism, but as someone who suspects all human action.

There is finally a tragedy, the death of the child that Federico has with his lover, but the father's reaction is one of cruel indifference. He only seems to redeem himself when he refuses to marry the noblewoman, whose fortune awaits him, when he is married to a young man. for the goods that Federico's lover had to sell when she went bankrupt. However, he does not regret this renunciation too much. He has only really loved one, and the spirit of his youth reappears, more mature and battered, to carry out an act of renunciation that in the end has no more merit than that of responding to mutual contempt. But for him, whose failures are like the failures of a minor thief, it is already enough, and that is why the reader cannot despise him completely. Flaubert makes his characters lovable, petty and treacherous, naive in their stupid vanity. Very much like any of us. Federico and his friend end up alone, as at the beginning of the novel, and they only find a brief anecdote that unites them without conditions or hypocrisy: the time they went to a brothel and had to flee in fear when they faced the women they were going to sleep with. They laugh about it now, but they long for the grace and transparency of that early age, before their real sentimental education.

### Salammbó (1862)

This novel deals with the siege of Carthage by the mercenaries that the republic itself had hired to help in the fight against the Romans. The war is over and an exceptional feast is held, and the inhabitants and government of Carthage believe they can satisfy the aspirations of the barbarians with wine, women and food. That night passes and they withdraw from the city walls, but are spurred on by Spendius, a former slave, to claim the promised pay. He incites the chief captain of his legion, Matho, to confront Carthage. Emissaries and ambassadors arrive who try to excuse themselves, saying that the war has exhausted the riches. Finally the barbarians decide to attack Carthage. At the same time, the daughter of Amilcar, King of Carthage, is seen by Matho, and he falls hopelessly in love with her, to the point that the only strength he has left after seeing her is that which makes him fight against the republic. The scene and Matho's monologue describing what he does not yet know for sure but senses, is one of the most beautiful ever written, a speech worthy of the best Shakespeare. Time passes and battles follow one another. The veil of the goddess Tanit, protector of Carthage, is stolen by Matho and Spendius,

hoping that this affront will demoralize the republic. Amilcar sees his daughter humiliated, who is said to have been seduced by Matho, and this leads her to recover the veil to redeem herself. She crosses the border and enters Matho's tent. She seduces him to take off the veil, and when he surrenders to her, Salammbó takes it off and then flees. Matho decides to fight harder than ever to take revenge on Carthage and its inhabitants. The battles follow one another with advantages for one and the other alternately. Both lose men and equipment. Finally, the victory goes to Amilcar. But Salammbó, just before being married to one of the main captains, Nar-Havas, dies for having been one of the mortals who touched the veil of the goddess.

The plot of this novel greatly surprised Flaubert's contemporaries. Accustomed to literature of customs, it was shocking to find a novel that took place in such remote times and written in such a bloody style and taking so many historical licenses. Because it is not a document, it is fiction, as if Flaubert had invented each of the episodes. There are no traces of historicism or parchment-like documentary or mere information. It is pure action and exact and detailed development of the events as the characters have lived them. They are as vivid and concretely human as Emma Bovary, they feel passions and are dissatisfied with the education they have received. Salammbó wonders about the gods, if they really cannot be questioned; Matho, a man of war, is driven to fight even though he might wish to live in peace; Spendius constantly wants to demonstrate the intelligence of his Greek origin and therefore to denigrate those who once enslaved him. Amilcar Barca seems to be the only imperishable force, intelligence and skill above the wise priests, he keeps the pride and honour of the city intact. Salammbó's language is bloody and unprecedented for the time. It is epic and poetic, with nothing to envy Homer. What's more, we seem to be reading Homer with the grammatical neatness of Shakespeare's monologues. The descriptions of the battles, the weapons and war artefacts, the animals used are detailed and beautifully described. Death and wounds, decapitations and amputations, corpses eaten away by birds of prey, all this is written in a language that is still shocking and darkly beautiful today. How many 20th century authors, accustomed to describing crudely and in bad taste, could learn from Flaubert. That is why a great author is not limited to one genre, he is capable of doing well in any, because the skill and The intuition of his talent knows what suits each subject. Above men and their private wars, above the dead or the republics they bring down, the gods are the ones who finally give the final blow. Carthage believed it had triumphed, with its king and its princess about to marry the bravest captain of its armies. But the princess, as well as her enamored enemy, finally dies for having dared to touch and clothe herself with the veil of the goddess, for having dared to feel for a moment like a being more divine than human.



### Three Tales (1877)

Until he was twenty, Flaubert had dedicated himself to writing two types of narrative: a pair of novels in a genre clearly attached to the romanticism learned in his readings of the 18th century, exacerbated by the temperament of the adolescent who wrote them, that is to say the taste for the dramatic, the macabre and the tragic with a very rich language but with little style of its own and above all loaded with abundant rhetoric. The other genre he cultivated until that age was fantasy, but the plots are in my opinion implausible and unattractive, in addition to the rhetorical language already mentioned. From the age of twenty to thirty he devoted himself to travelling, and this experience served him in different ways: as a way of maturing personally and therefore of looking at the world with different eyes, and to train his writing through the travel notes he took. After he was thirty, the Flaubert we admire appeared, revealing himself with his first major novel: *Madame Bovary*. Other novels would follow in the meantime, until the appearance at the age of 56 of *Three Tales*. The first of these (*A Soul of God*) is a text created by a writer who perfectly masters his style. Despite not having written stories for many years, he still masters the short form, and let us not forget that in his narrative style there is a certain tendency to create individual situations that are subtly amalgamated with each other when it comes to a novel. That is why, in these relatively short texts, his expert hand does not let anything slip through that is not strictly necessary. This first story tells us about a simple woman who works in a bourgeois house for almost all her life. Her own life and interests are confused with those of the family for whom she works. The children of the house are like her own children, she even suffers more for them than for her own family, because she only has one nephew. The approval of the lady of the house is always sought and required with the utmost vehemence. There are doses of humor that derive from her naivety and ignorance, and this is moving because the author's approach is not to bring us closer to imperfections as virtues, but as characteristics of the human being he describes. There are no qualifications or judgments. The ending is of a beauty that can only be described as serene and full of a beatitude bordering on the mystical; the way in which a pet, the only being to which we attach ourselves for its extreme fidelity, can merge with what we adore the most. In the second story (*The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller*) we find the closest Flaubert with his style developed in *Salammbô*. The historical takes the stage and the characters, but the author's hand digs into the souls of the protagonists. However, he does not search their minds with psychological artifices, but through their actions, and in this case the events occur continuously and are characterized by being excessive and the language absolutely crude. There is no mercy that is worth it, Flaubert tells us, when it comes to creating and making our characters act. They are born and are led towards a tragic destiny that they themselves have created. There are superstitions, legends and prophecies, but they are only

insinuations of something that is rooted in them and they are revealed to us through their actions. Saint Julian needs to redeem himself, and for that he is willing to do anything. The end is shocking, terribly beautiful. Body against body, Saint Julian finds Christ in the leper. The third tale (Herodias) takes up the well-known episode of the death of Saint John the Baptist due to political maneuvers and exacerbated personal passions. Here the historical background must be limited to earthly and documented facts, unlike the previous tale, but it does develop what happens in Herod's mind. Political speculations, passionate memories, submission to the power of Rome, and finally the sexual excitement that clouds everything: the logic of the moment and the possible benefits obtained. But Salome's power is not hers, but that of her mother Herodias. She is the mind behind her daughter's body, the one who has pulled the strings above and behind so many maneuvers and speculations to which men have given themselves over to decide the fate of the prophet. The development of the tale has the elegance of a novel set in the 19th century in an aristocratic salon. We already know the ending, but Or does Flaubert's approach not cease to be disturbing and new for that reason? Men pass by, he seems to tell us with the ending, where the protagonists are no longer mentioned, where there is only a heavy head that passes from hand to hand of two travelers who carry it as a symbol.

#### Journey to the East (1851)

Between the ages of 20 and 30, Flaubert devoted himself to traveling. From these trips he extracted notes for three books, the longest of which is the third, *Journey to the East*, of more than six hundred pages. Although Flaubert the writer's expressive maturity had not yet developed, these trips, in addition to the obvious accumulation of experiences and the consequent learning for personal maturity, are an invaluable practice of observation for his future writing. What had been lacking in the texts before he was 20 years old, that is, the romantic rhetoric, the detachment of the characters, the implausibility of some fantastic texts, is here overlooked, because all he needs is the expression and the austere and exact description of what he sees and is doing at that moment of the trip. And he does this with the skill he already masters and with the crudeness that will characterize his future production.

It is not a monotonous description of places and landscapes, nor even a chronicle of what he and his companions did. Among the details of every trip there are sharp observations of native characters, animals and objects. For example, the way he describes how carrion animals eat corpses in the Egyptian desert, the route through the neighborhoods of Cairo and the prostitutes who populate them at night. Here the language is grotesque and casual, and perhaps that is why it is surprising. We are not dealing

with an ordinary traveler, who travels by plane and stays in middle-class hotels. He is a traveller who will travel on camels, sleep on mattresses infested with fleas, sleep with cheap prostitutes, eat horrible food and suffer from indigestion and fever, but who after all this will know how to appreciate and describe in detail the works of art and the small characteristics that make a stray dog or a toothless old woman the most important thing in a town. He would later apply these observations to many of his novels; in *Journey to the East* he captures the crudeness and intemperance that he would later cultivate in *Salammbó*.

Egypt, Athens, Constantinople, Smyrna, Palestine, Lebanon and finally Italy. In Italy he limits himself to giving impressions of the works of art, as if he had stopped being an adventurer and had become a tourist. But even so he is not an ordinary tourist. He is critical and lapidary about what he does not like, he is moderate and barely enthusiastic about what he admires. Remember that we are traveling in 1850, there are no photographs, so travel books had to include accurate descriptions for those who could not visit those places. But this need was not only for practicality for Flaubert. He knew that he had to observe and record what he observed. He knew that all of this would be substance for the full development of his literary art.

#### *Journey to the Pyrenees and Corsica (1840) Journey to Brittany (1847)*

These two books reflect the author's travels at 19 and 26 years of age, respectively. Although his fictional narrative was not mature, and was plagued by much rhetoric and some implausible arguments, his style for the chronicle shows not only the writer at his craft, but a vision that is slowly but steadily maturing. Both books are more conventional in relation to what would be his third travel chronicle: *Journey to the East*. In the latter, his style of short, strictly descriptive and crude sentences shows a more mature style and a somewhat pessimistic and acidic perspective of the world. In the first travel stories, this rhetoric is toned down and serves, however, to give a more poetic tone and a certain disenchanted innocence. There is greater dedication to legends and stories, some descriptions of characters show the master he will become, but above all, personal reflections stand out. These reflections are the ones that gain more ground in the second, and give it even more value than the descriptions and narrations of the trip itself. If in the trip to the East Flaubert is overwhelmed by the exotic and this is what determines his drier type of writing, in the trips closer to his culture he saw the need to incorporate reflections on his lifestyle and his own culture, in relation to contrasts within Europe itself. Thus, the comments in the second book are of an irony that the English would develop only a little later, and of a subtlety hidden behind elegant but lapidary humor. For example, the anecdote about the

stones of Carnac, where he makes fun of the supposed archaeologists, or the description of the circus in Brest, where the crudeness is worthy of his later Salammbó.

I note, finally, that both can be read as a first and second part, but the most valuable So it is the second one, where we find the best Flaubert from the first stage of his development as a writer.

Juan Carlos Onetti

Let the Wind Speak (1979)

When you start reading a novel by Onetti, the first paragraphs confuse the reader. We don't know exactly where we are, we are only aware that when we opened the book we fell into a place completely different from our own. Very slowly, our sight becomes accustomed to that strange light that the words, the tone of the author, are taking us to. Without realizing it, we have entered wrapped as in a cocoon by those words so strangely combined, that this world is already another, where other rules govern its logic. In the first pages nothing special seems to happen. We hear the dialogues, the superfluous actions, codified by the characters long before we fell into this world. We are trapped and we don't understand a word of what is happening. It is the same thing that happens when we listen to a conversation on a bus or in a bar. From the few words, and especially from the tone in which they were spoken, we imagine a whole story that is most likely not only wrong, but unfair.

But in fiction we cannot be unfair. The author creates and allows us a margin of recreation that is in accordance with the verisimilitude of his characters. Because the more we identify with them, the more faces they will have, the more faces for the same actions. As many as their readers are. That is why we cannot be unfair, since we would never be unfair to ourselves on purpose. Medina, the main character of this novel, has had problems with Brausen, creator and God of the Santamaría region. He has fled and seeks refuge in Lavanda. They help him by giving him work, but this ends when the person he must care for dies, and he then compares him to an almost messenger of death. In his lover Frieda he also sees death: he can never catch it but he can't escape it either. She has a son from another woman, someone she thinks is her son, and despite not needing to recognize him, she clings to his memory and seeks him out to help him. It is perhaps him she seeks to help, him when he was very young. She wants to save him from Frieda, from her spider hands that try and destroy everything. We are already in the conflict. The characters are more understandable. But we wonder who is telling us. The narrative voice takes

the twists and turns and the points of view of the characters without abandoning its alien voice. We feel the color of the different looks, and yet all the voices have the same tone, similar grammatical breaks and images that stand out for their shocking or opaque beauty. It is not the author who tells us, it is the language, and it describes not the external face of things, but the reverse face, the one we do not always like to see.

Language is another character in Onetti's literature. Perhaps the main one. Because without language and tone we could not accustom our sight to an environment as dark as that of Santamaría and her characters. Nothing can be seen in closed places where light never enters. Can we really see inside our soul? The town and the Swiss colony, Lavanda and the regions that make up Onetti's world are inside the characters, they are worlds that inhabit more than inhabited worlds. That is why they emerged from Brausen's imagination, and Medina returns to him when he realizes that, outside of Santamaría, he will do nothing but wander without living. Juntacadáveres helps him realize this, more precisely the corpse of Larsen that visits him in the brothel. He is going to rescue his son from Frieda, even if he is not aware of it, it is what he wants. But after several attempts to get close to his son, to briefly believe that he has saved him from the woman, from the drugs, he knows it is useless. He meets Frieda, accompanies her to her house. He sees her undress in the stream. The next day they find her dead. Medina, as commissioner, heads the investigation. We readers know that he is the main suspect, the one who has the motives for that death. We also know that he is not going to give himself away. They find the son, who was in Frieda's house all night. In jail, the son has killed himself and leaves a confession. He says that he is the guilty one. Medina now knows that the son is the one who saved him, and what else can he do than save the city, Santamaría from itself. He makes secret arrangements with someone so that the city disappears. The innocents worry him for a while, not too much, but if it is about innocents, there is the innocent and happy prostitute who follows him like a dog everywhere. And as he sees the fire approaching, he takes out his gun and commits an act of mercy towards her. He saves her as he tried to save his son and as his son saved him. The author does not need many words to make this ending perhaps the most impressive in American literature. It only requires words and atmospheres that have been linked together throughout the novel. Small links that form a large chain that is no longer a chain but vital wood. If the ending moves us, it is not because we see the city dying under fire, only one or two lines describe the catastrophe, but because of the feelings that have gained such an enormous place in the novel, that they have become the wind that carries that fire that destroys everything. Onetti would return to Santamaría before and after. The other novels are more chamber-like, the city feeds the destiny of characters who already carry their burden and their emptiness from long before, as in Juntacadáveres or El astillero, but in this novel the characters determine the destiny of the city. The city finally takes shape and meaning, like a character that was built over many years and many texts. *Let the Wind Speak* is almost an epic, but not an epic

of confused morality like Juntacadáveres, or the moral epic of individual failure like in El astillero. When it burns, the city dies out of filial love. Medina's love for his son and the son's for Medina, even though there had never been any blood ties. And Onetti kills his city with that same love.

Carlos Dariel

According to the Fire (2004) Donde la Sed (2010)

In the first book, the result of a very long learning and maturation of the poetic self is evident. They are very elaborate works, they are mature verses. I find it commendable to have avoided falling into common places, with verses that have an apparent simplicity, almost without descriptions or metaphors, but that build a thought, an idea, an emotion. The idea of defining "being" (consciousness) by the negative (the "non-being" of defined forms: silence, remains, shadow, wind, hollow, etc.) is interesting. The only concrete thing seems to be the fire, which in the end is destruction (not being) but from which remains the "brand" or construction of a thought, which as one of the last poems says, is a nerve of the universe.

In the second book, Dariel shows us a change of direction in his poetry, a moderate change, but with the same quality to which he has accustomed us. This change is difficult to define, it is subtle and evident at the same time, as it should be in every good poet. First, the changes are internal, then, they are expressed in the poetry, matured, meditated, located in the appropriate way and form. Since his first book, Dariel's poetry has been characterized by the conciseness and maturity developed in each poem, resulting in a sharp and accurate vision, mature and serene, sad but not hopeless. There is, in general, an idea of fatality in his poetry, his texts are forceful in their affirmative synthesis. Dariel does not hesitate when writing, he does not doubt what he says, not even the contradictions or ambiguities that his poems pose as a theme. Thus, in this collection we find an air of mysticism in many of the poems, but this mysticism does not refer to divinities or religious beliefs, but to the ultimate meaning of things in the world, even to the feelings and events that surround us. The value of small things is much greater than we imagine, and this appreciation is what we call mysticism, not to adore or overvalue, but to give each detail of each instant of man's passage in the world in its proper place, as when he calls writing a sacred task. And this brings us to another point of his theme: poetry and the word. Communication and communion. The repetition of certain words, certain items, such as look, hands, touch, and their relationship with these others is remarkable: hug, stone, stains. See, for example, the clear and wonderful poem Dialectic of my hands, or

Vacillations, where we have this poetic and philosophical discovery: the body is our ignorance/ and we go towards it/ in every attempt. The word and its eternal contradiction: the lack of communication implicit in itself. At one point he tells us: he suspects that the words are not/ the poem/ perhaps its edge; or writing/ fabric/ of a short blanket.

One of Dariel's constant concerns has always been the function of the word and poetry, its place in the world, the apparent conflict with the practical everyday life of the common man. The search for relationships between word, poetry and man leads the author along deserted paths, full of stones, where he stumbles at every moment, but there are moments where the author finds consonance with his past, with the first man, as in the poem Synopsis of Evolution, or with time and remote things or objects, as in Loom, or with nature, as in The Instant. In this book there are many poems dedicated to authors with whom he feels affinity, poems that are tributes that are a search and an explanation, a reason for being that does not really need to be explained, about poetry. From the epigraph, we notice that the change of direction already mentioned is moving towards a poetry with a conceptual tone, but the poems are not in the Girri style, but more concise, less intellectually complicated and more rooted in questions than in answers. Girri explores and tries out answers, he is a scientist of poetry. Dariel thinks and asks himself, meditates after making observations. He raises doubts and knows that they are enough to express himself. Intelligence is often corroborated in the quality of the questions and not in the vanity of the answers. The conceptual in Dariel is in the lucid and analytical look, which preserves the intensely human flavor, and above all an attitude committed both to his instrument, the word and poetry, and to his object of study, that mystery called man.

Gerardo Curiá

Quebrado azul (2004) Serie los suicidas (2005) Caldén (2008)

In these books of poems, Curiá does what he has always done, that is, write poetry saying out loud what everyday words cannot say. He rescues the silence of forgotten words to renew language. To do this, he uses everyday words, but they continually change their meaning, they exchange their concepts to be something else or several at the same time. Thus, the words water, sun, sand, light, stone, tree, wind, fire, are each and every one the same and different. This procedure renews language, which is not a word in itself but a fusion of them. He does not need to use compound terms, but rather to resort to the original simplicity of each one. And that is why the feeling of ancestral remembrance is so well expressed in this collection of poems. The same theme and the same group of characters increase the

effect of the chosen procedure. Each poem is a long poem composed of several poems of varying length, some of which are even one verse long. Each one is also preceded by another poem as a summary, almost like the beginning of a chapter in a nineteenth-century novel. The result has its own logic, contradictory in appearance, but nevertheless more logical for the recreated world than the reality of the everyday world.

These books are different in theme, the first is more urban, it seems to me, like seeing things and people on the street from the point of view of the curb. It has a slow rhythm, without stridency, which gains in intellectual emotion with everyday elements. There is one or another rural poem, which relates it to the last of the books discussed. The blue stone as the source and end of life, the fingers inside the stone that work in its spaces and make moss, insects that inhabit it, but finally silence and complete stillness predominate, the night and the blue stone sum this up, I think. I also highlight the poem that talks about burning the memory of pain, leaving ashes that do not hurt but turn the landscape into something dead. They are terribly bitter poems, but together they leave a feeling of wonder, like when we see something strange inside something ordinary, but that does not frighten, but rather moves us because we recognize it as our own. The poems about the children and the one about the goat are capital poems, due to their austere simplicity and enormous meaning. Making connections with other readings, it made me remember a text by Stephen Crane, where he talks about someone who finds a beast on his way eating a heart, and asks him what it is like, the beast answers with resignation that it is very bitter, but that it is his heart.

The glossary added at the end of Caldén is not essential for understanding and enjoying the poems, perhaps for a more exhaustive analysis. But each combination of words is a discovery, and each image a renewal of the catalogue of what the senses are capable of capturing.

Examples: on page 38 the word "stone" is negative because of what is obtained from it in this case: smoke; on page 67 it is positive because it is a more lasting consequence of another element: milk. The "wind" is not only a symbol of destruction, but of time passed. Concrete elements become conceptual elements: time is a thorn, shadow is light, fire is rain. As a final example, what better than to transcribe one of the most expressive verses of the collection: thirst is the stone in the knot of the lips, and thus establish that Curiá is one of the best contemporary poets of Argentina.

I DON'T NEED YOU ANYMORE

"I'm a writer, and everything I write is both a confession and a struggle to understand things about myself and this world in which I live."



Arthur Miller

James Joyce

Dubliners (1914)

Joyce's first book, this collection of stories opens the way to a time and place that are nevertheless universal. The comments on this book speak of the author's concern for the detail of certain details of the reality that he intended to capture, but they do not go beyond what is strictly necessary. There are names that almost a hundred years later we will not be able to recognize, but it is only one more color in the scenery, a tone that we did not know and that contributes to the background of the stories. Because the important thing is the way in which Joyce has managed, in a first book, to fuse the characters into the environment, to the point that the era is captured by the inner appearance of the characters. Their characteristics are so perfectly marked and outlined, that describing their dress or way of walking is a detail that makes us savor it as part of ourselves, something like adding a spice that ends up defining it completely. The language is exact for the subject dealt with. Brief and merely descriptive in certain stories that are closer to a narrative, with enormous poetry for the longer and more melancholic ones. Strictly raw, full of credible dialogues in those where the action or the ideas of the characters predominate. In all of them there is something else that has not been said, a certain sadness, irony, or something disturbing that we presume and that is not told to us. Joyce covers an impressive range of feelings in his characters, from the failed office worker to the humiliated bourgeois, from a priest who dies taking a mystery with him to the simplicity of an employee who does not know that she will soon die. What is the secret to describing with such precision the soul of a character with whom we are only reading for a few minutes, as if in addition to seeing them, we were touching their soul? What is it that connects a family party with a dead person that nobody knows, and that nevertheless does not move us as if we had known all the dead in the world? Quickness of the eye or extreme sensitivity, intuition or previous knowledge, Joyce has taken his secret to that region of which he speaks to us without even describing it, at the end of the story *The Dead*.

Pedro Orgambide

Everyday and fantastic stories (1965) Stories with tangos and bullfights (1976)

The first book is a wonderful collection of stories. It is divided into two sections. The first part is a set of portraits of ordinary characters, tragically simple, losers in their own right in general. They have made a choice at their time, they made a decision that has marked them for life, but there seems to be little time for regret. This is simply one more choice. While their lives continue (one continues playing the guitar to support himself, another lives his unchanging widowhood on the beach, another returns to his old job as a maid, another returns to his lonely apartment), sometimes they think they could have chosen differently, and yet they know that if they lived again they would have done the same, because their character defines their life and their life the character that made them choose that way. The language is concise, poetic and full of human nuances. The last story in the section "The Old Men" is masterful.

The second part includes fantastic stories or tales. They are shorter and more allegorical than the previous ones. They all deal with the subject of the passage of time and immortality. Allegory seems to be the appropriate resource for this type of story, which, rather than dealing with science fiction or fantasy as a genre, does so as an instrument to talk about more universal themes: the human and immortality. Thus, an anthropologist is led by a boatman through a lake where time and space seem to converge, and a child sees the entire history of the world in a campfire. There are two exquisite and subtle stories about vampires, which relate them to the language of the best Mujica Lainez. The final story has the dark beauty of Calvino's "Invisible Cities." These stories are treated with poetic resources, ambiguous and subtle at the same time, bordering on legend but without losing their intimate immediacy with the human.

The second book mentioned above is uneven. There are stories with trivial themes, whose humorous intention is not enough to justify them, in my opinion. They are descriptive and deal with a pleasant, sometimes absurd, local situation that attempts to be the reason for the stories. But they are poor. Some themes are trite, and are not even saved by a new treatment, but rather rhetorical and almost amateurish in their preparation. The exception are the following stories, where we meet again with the best of Orgambide: Vida y memoria del guerrero Nemesio Villafañe and Elegía para una yunta brava. To a lesser extent, but redeemable, are: La señorita Wilson, El hombre y el chico (which although repeated is moving), Los mellizos (repeated but effective, especially for its brevity), and El mono (good, but too close to Cortázar's Torito).

Silvina Ocampo

El pecado mortal (Selection by José Bianco)

This is a collection of stories made by José Bianco for EUDEBA in 1966. Bianco was a great writer, translator and editor, and Adding to this her personal knowledge of the author, the result is absolutely recommended for those who have not read Silvina Ocampo before. Her stories, in principle and upon first reading, should be classified as strange. Not because of the language, which is understandable although extremely professional and exquisite, calm and free of unnecessary adjectives, but always loaded with meaning. That is to say, the sentences are constructed to suggest constantly, but in the manner of someone who insinuates cruelties with a face of complete innocence. The narrative voice of the author seems to involve several narrative voices that alternate without grammatical barriers, with only the point of view being modified, as in *El pecado mortal*, where the narration is that of a witness character who appeals to the second person or protagonist; in *Icera*, where there is almost a constant alternation between the adult male and the girl-woman; or in *La pluma mágico*, where the change of perspective is almost the argumentative objective of the story. Here we must speak of the fantastic theme, which in different ways, explicit or suggested, always hovers over these stories. I think it is due to a conjunction of several factors that feed off each other: the ambiguous language, between tragic and absurd at the same time (*The photographs*); the arguments, which although they are everyday, always have an element of strangeness (*The guests*); the characters, whose thinking logic is far from rational (*Autobiografía de Irene*). There are stories where humor wants to prevail, but it is a black and very acid humor (*The photographs*, *The velvet dress*, *Celestina*).

It is not easy to get into Silvina Ocampo's literature. She is one of those authors that you like right away or you never do. Her style is intimately fused with the aesthetic sensitivity of the narration, that is, the internal music and the strange logic of her arguments.

Daniel Moyano

"The Wait" and Other Stories

This is a selection of stories published by Centro Editor in 1982. It includes stories from four of his books of short stories. The preliminary study places

Moyano within two trends: the realist and the Kafkaesque. For those who have not read him before and read this study, the impression seems somewhat limited, if not partially erroneous. Although the common elements of almost all the stories are a type of family made up of a patriarchal uncle, good or bad, a more passive aunt, cousins in large numbers and an orphan protagonist or narrator who lives with them, and the social environment of scarce economic resources, the dark and desolate atmosphere of the stories leads to a more interior than exterior vision. That is to say, the narrator's concerns are clearly more psychological and emotional than socioeconomic. Everything is shown through what the characters do and think, and although there is not much dialogue, the indirect voice has the right tone to transmit the atmosphere through the characters' vision. There is an almost imperceptible interrelation between the character and the place, both feed and are dependent on each other. The first book: "The Monster" works mainly on symbolism in the Kafkaesque way: there is always something that is not seen or is sought or feared, something that is not defined but that marks the life of the protagonist.

The second and third books: "The Worm" and "The Interrupted Fire" are more mature, and although they continue in the same style, the setting gains prominence and the characters' conflicts become more concrete. Two exceptional examples are The Rescue and The Worm, where the protagonists' obsession with another character is closely related to an arid field, in the first story, and a house, in the second. Another masterful tale is The Dog and Time, which brings us to the third common factor: the protagonism of the children and their particular vision, sometimes direct and sometimes filtered by the evocation from adulthood.

The fourth book included: "The Crocodile's Case", partially changes the trend: it is more explicitly realistic, but at the same time gains in intensity due to its more concise language and the stories are shorter. The symbolism gains in particular style, in relation to the first book, and is more cruel and more poetic at the same time.

Jeremias Gotthelf

The Black Spider (1842)

Gotthelf was a Swiss evangelical pastor, theologian and Swiss writer, author of thirteen novels, whose objective, according to the bibliography, was to carry out moralizing teachings through his writing. Judging by this novel, his objective was to teach how to think rather than to moralize or impose dogmas. Let's see: a community subjugated by a feudal lord makes

a pact with the devil in order to comply with the demands of its lord, but must deliver an unbaptized child in exchange. Time passes and the people postpone the delivery, even when they have already obtained the expected benefit. But the devil kisses a woman and deposits the child in the basket. On his cheek, the germ of a plague, the black spider, which will wreak havoc on the village. The author uses a language far from allegory or legend, it is explicitly terrifying but ambiguously moralizing. Because at the end of the novel we ask ourselves, is this plague a punishment from the devil or the reprehensible arm of God? Every time we sin, the black spider will wreak havoc among us, so: does God use the same weapons as his opponent? More than 150 years after Stephen King, and remembering the latter's good novels, we see that there is nothing new under the sun, and a now almost unknown author, without literary vanity or outstanding sales, without appealing to rudeness or expanding on hundreds of unnecessary pages, has developed a fully enjoyable, entertaining novel that leaves much to think about.

Samuel Butler

Erewhon (1872)

The novel genre, especially in the twentieth century, has accepted many changes and metamorphoses, both structural, formal and content-related. But it is not uncommon to find these variants from time to time in 19th century literature and especially in English literature, which has followed a rather particular path in relation to the rest of Europe. They have distinguished themselves by a literature of exact, sharp, satirical language. Erewhon, an anagram that refers to "nowhere" or "no place or nowhere," is a mixture of adventure and exploration novel, scientific speculation and critical essay. Ultimately this trait is the one that prevails, since it is the instrument and end of the novel. The author presents a hidden country that is a caricature of English society, at least at the beginning. But this caricature is not intended to be merely laughable or sarcastic. There is a tragic misfortune in the very moral principles that govern this society. Exaggeration, typical of caricature, ceases to be the only objective and is only a means to highlight the unreasonableness of certain foundations that are considered indisputable, that no one talks about because they are established, that we all know but that no one discusses because they are uncomfortable. Example: the themes developed mainly are health, justice, education, technology; from here we move on to other more metaphysical ones, time and unborn beings. In the country of Erewhon, physical weakness is considered a crime, while mental alteration is only an illness; children are annoying beings who enter the world under their exclusive will

and by signing a paper that exonerates their parents of all responsibility. In turn, the narrator who explores this society, although he pretends to be objective, inserts annotations that reveal the same evils that he intends to criticize, for example, as he believes he has found one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, he dreams of converting it to Christianity and thereby gaining posterity. This contradiction is one more link in the framework that unites society and morality, philosophy and religion; a literary framework that makes us think beyond the enjoyment implicit in literature.

Horace

Odes-Epodes (35-15 BC)

This book from the Austral Collection includes the complete Odes and Epodes of the author from the 1st century BC, in a very correct translation by Bonifacio Chamorro. Quintus Horace Flaccus has been revalued today for his subtle sensitivity towards human affections and weaknesses. The author speaks of love, death, old age and youth from a clear and not presumptuous chair of experience. The best Odes are the thirty from the first book, where each one is practically perfect in its music, subtlety and poetry. Their rhythm and concatenation of ideas are completely modern, the construction of the poems makes them very similar to the current traditional structure, bearing the title of Odes simply because they are dedicated to or were poetically suggested by someone: an emperor, king, god or friend of the author. The problem, in my opinion, begins when warlike and mythical themes prevail over human value. When these Odes become homages to gods and warriors, without taking root in their relationship with the human factor, they result in an epic told in verse, tedious and repetitive (far from Homer's great achievements, of course). He even falls into contradictions: in the first book he says that his pen is not suitable for talking about weapons, however this is what he does in almost the majority of the last two series of Odes. It is expected of a consecrated poet that he intimately or obligatorily gives in to highlighting values imposed by the state, but it is difficult to find that depth and poetic flight go hand in hand with political or social commitment. The second book retains the characteristics of the first, the third rather less so, but the fourth is dispensable.

The Epodes are contemporary with the first book of the Odes, and although they retain certain fresh and original characteristics of the latter, they lose value compared to its great achievements. I transcribe the simple and masterful verses from Ode XXIV of Book I: A hard law... but patience relieves/ pains that we are forbidden to avoid.

Rafael Alberti

Poetic anthology (selection by Ernesto Sábato)

This anthology from Editorial Losada is a very good opportunity to enter the author's world, since it is an extensive and well-selected anthology. In this case, it includes books of Alberti's poems from 1924 to 1972. I only knew his book of memoirs *The Lost Grove*, which I liked moderately and I was curious about his poetry. I began to read the anthology with enthusiasm. The first books are somewhat immature, but valid as a learning path in the search for a style and the confirmation of a side that is always present throughout his work: the song, the Spanish tonadilla, as a form and a joyful and carefree feeling, something innocent and suddenly surprised, of youth. But with *Cal y canto*, *Sobre los ángeles* and *Sermones y moradas* (1926-1928) Alberti reaches his highest poetic height, which in my opinion he would never equal later. In the three books mentioned the author adheres to the surrealist school, moving away slightly from it to adopt a personal style. He does not completely abandon his village characters, but rather elevates and universalizes them through more profoundly human themes. There is even a certain fantastic tone that increases the contrasts: poverty and wealth, hate and love, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, heaven and earth. His homages to other authors or actors of silent film are subtle in the first case, taking something of the tone of the one who pays homage, and full of self-confidence and open-mindedness in the other cases, in keeping with the strength and vitality that we are accustomed to seeing in the Spanish personality in general. This characteristic music and joviality is combined with completely new images, the breaks that are not so much grammatical as stylistic coherence. However, congruence is not lost, but rather gained, as I said before in contrasts. Example: The man without eyes knows that the backs of the dead suffer from insomnia because the pine boards are too soft to withstand the nocturnal attack of ten hot hooks ("Sermon of the Four Truths"). Unfortunately, the Spanish Civil War arrived, and with it the political commitment, which in this case was sincere and not forced, as can be seen in Alberti's poetry from this moment on. The books that follow are diametrically opposed to the previous ones: there is no surrealism, there is no subtlety, they are trite and declamatory, they do not even touch on the true tragic feeling of war, although he pretends to feel sorry for the people in his poems. Poetry and politics hardly get along, even if they walk hand in hand through bombed streets. One sees one thing, and the other, very different things. There are exceptional cases, and even then they are only valid to a certain extent, like César Vallejo and his *Spain*, take this cup away from me. But Alberti has not shown himself to be as great as Vallejo,

and his poetry loses its way forever. All his later books are not even a shadow of what he was from 1926 to 1928, no matter how hard he tries and some poems are worthwhile.

Juan Rodolfo Wilcock

### The Etruscan Temple (1973)

A great writer and translator (see his translation of Kafka's *The Sentence*), Wilcock is one of those who have remained on the fringes of commercial literature, and who has developed his work in a very particular and peculiar way. His language is technically perfect and the music of his prose tends to be meticulously crafted. But it is not complex and extravagant in itself, but rather for what it does not say. His plots tend to reflect the absurdity of everyday situations, highlighting the curious and strange aspects of archetypes, cutting out circumstances and submerging them in acid until you see their skeleton, or at least the strange figures that have remained of things that were once so well-known and familiar. That is what he does in his book *Hechos inquietantes* (1960). In *El Templo Etrusco* we begin to see a simple, almost childlike situation in a provincial town: somewhat cartoonish characters plan and find absurd obstacles to a very simple project: to raise a monument, although it is not known for what purpose or in homage to what. From this situation we move on to increasingly strange and absurd events, deaths, mass murders, rapes, and the tone is of the most absolutely black humor. Later, fantasy takes place, labyrinths and underground characters appear and disappear as in a fantastic parade. But all this is narrated in a casual, pleasant and elegant way, with only slight and ironic comments from the author that recall the style of English or Central European narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries. What is the author trying to tell us with this novel? An allegory, perhaps, of society, a caricature of human behavior, perhaps. But beyond that, This leaves us with the bitter taste after a smile, the annoying restlessness of doubt, the feeling of a certain inner emptiness at the end of the novel. Disturbing factors that the author has taken care to reveal in us.

### The Book of Monsters (1978)

Here Wilcock, at 58 years old and in the last book of his life, shows that his talent and his power of observation and analysis never waned, nor did the corrosive power of his narrative language. But this power is not based on



overwhelming technical and grammatical language, but on the discretion and finely polished simplicity of a structure that uses irony and mordacity as fine-tuning elements. There are many elements to take into account when writing, and perhaps it can only be achieved in maturity. The truth is that in *The Book of Monsters* there is a bestiary that is not based on monsters of supposed verisimilitude, but on common beings that have suddenly acquired a characteristic that totally differentiates them from the others, and it does not matter if this characteristic contradicts life from a biological point of view or not. Here the laws are different, a man can become a tree or a set of mirrors, he can be transparent or made of cotton and straw. They continue to live as they can and even be happy, but the material element that makes them up, or the immateriality in many cases, or the simple concept of their existence, is a means to demonstrate something. This underlying message is implicit in the background, but the irreverent irony and black humor make intelligence prevail, and it is intelligence that knows how to see what needs to be seen. Sometimes the symbolism is obvious, as in the story about the literary critic, other times it is more hidden, and sometimes the author lets a moral be seen, similar to a fable by Lafontaine (to which these texts seem to owe much), but in all of them there is such a level of narrative skill, such homogeneity and solidity in the structure of each story, that it is not possible to reach the end without a somewhat bitter smile on the reader's lips.

Martín Rodríguez

Lampião (2004) El conejo (2001)

With respect to Lampião, I am not going to talk about the formal aspects, the deliberate breaking of forms, alliterations, use of lowercase letters and altered punctuation, all technical aspects that merge with the content. I think that the unity of the poems, which tell the story of a character, is especially important. What is peculiar about this story is that it is not told with actions, but with intuitions, images, until the words, the language, become not a way of telling, but the character itself. The character is language, it is style. Another point is that of apparent paradoxes, or polarities if you can call them that: birth and death where there is no metamorphosis of one into the other, but a transubstantiation, both give rise to one another and are the same at the same time. The other polarity is that of death and life where the shadow of the dead is at the same time the shadow of the rest in which thirst (life) is quenched. The third is that of water and stone where the stone contains water, blood and pulse. The last one I want to mention is that of water and the moon where the reflection of the world is in the face and the face creates at the same time the world in

which it is reflected. There is an extremely peculiar voice, lacking commonplaces, and even when these seem to appear, they take on a different nuance because of the language that has been sounding from the previous verses.

In *El conejo* I point out the same thing as before regarding the use of language. The author has a peculiar gift for suggesting something by saying something else that is apparently trivial and disconnected, but the sum of images gives a connotation that forms like a cloud over the poem, and before turning the page there it is, with a form that is firmer than a reflection and more disturbing. Rodríguez works with ethereal visual images rather than concrete ones, but the precise and austere language, simple and fresh, makes it immediate and guides our imagination without us realizing it. His language shapes the innate intuition of each reader like an expert craftsman. What is “the rabbit,” we ask ourselves. It is enough to read a fragment of one of the poems: there it goes running through the snow/or at the edge of the lake it looks at the face of thousands of years. I insist, Martín Rodríguez seems to me to be one of the best Argentine poets who have known how to express the feeling and sensations of an urban generation formed in the last decade of the century. Because he doesn't need to resort to colloquial and disruptive language to be contemporary, but rather he fuses the simple vision of the everyday with poetry, and the result is a very particular amalgam.

Stephen King

*Everything is eventual* (2002)

It has often been said that the author is the least qualified to judge his work. King himself mentioned this in his book *On Writing*, but precisely those who teach do not always follow his rules. This collection of stories proves this statement, and when too many stories are put together, that risk is run. Fourteen stories, however, are not many, but they can be more than enough if their length brings them closer to the long story or the short novel, taking into account also the tendency, acknowledged by the author himself, to write with long cadences and sometimes, excessively. First, let's get the weeds out of the way. The comments on the stories, which King himself considered superfluous in other books and which he says he has yielded to in order to satisfy his readers, in this one are too long and add nothing; moreover, they tend to justify errors or explain what does not need to be explained. There are two failed stories: *Autopsy Room Number Four* and *Everything is Eventual*. Just the one that opens the book and the one that names the entire collection. This is what we were referring to when we said that the author does not always get it right when choosing

his best texts. Both stories fail in resolution, they are attractive for many pages, even original in a certain way, but the ending seems written and resolved by a tired author in a hurry to finish. Discarding the above, what remains are twelve stories that to a greater or lesser extent, demonstrate King's flexibility for genres and narrative voices. I have always been surprised by his ability to change the tone of the language. The way his characters speak varies with age, sex, the environment in which his story takes place. At the same time, the turns and common expressions in the different stories speak of the same society, which King has been effective in describing. The characters are exposed to chaotic, sometimes absurd situations, where they must demonstrate their courage to escape such horrors. When everything calms down, what remains is not the best it could have been. From the externally fleeting, from the deaths, the blood, the knives, we are left thinking, as the character does when discovering things that he did not know existed inside him and in the others. That is why the endings of stories like L.T.'s *Theory of Pets* or *Lunch at Gotham* are so pathetic. In other stories, the plain reality prevails, but it is as violent as that of the imagination. What is common in stories like *The Room of Death* and *The Death of Jack Hamilton* is not violence, but the interiority of the characters, who always, despite the worst horror, have a moment for humor, to make fun of themselves. Related to the two previous stories are *Everything You Love Will Be Taken Away from You* and *The Lucky Coin*, where the situations are common and simple, but the characters grotesquely complex. There are two stories where the supernatural and the inexplicable prevail, and this element is effectively captured despite being variations of myths recreated too often by literature and film. We are talking about *1408*, and to a much lesser extent *The Road Virus Travels North* (the weakest of these twelve). An isolated story is *The Little Sisters of Eluria*, part of the world of the *Dark Tower*, and which shows the poetic and lyrical force of a certain branch of King's language. We leave the two best stories in the collection for last: *The Man in the Black Suit* and *Riding the Bullet*. Both share a character exposed to supernatural situations, with the subsequent discovery of his own inner nature. The figure of the mother serves as a pretext to discover horrors or unconditional loves in the soul of the protagonist. One of the characters wonders what he would do if he had to choose between his mother's life or his own. The other will live forever restless, wondering when that horrible and strange figure that made him face the dark side of his family will appear again. The themes can be the same as always, some phrases too, as well as the taste for the scatological and the bizarre. Writers who are too prolific, even in spite of themselves and as long as they are sincere with their own work, tend to have extensive works of uneven quality. But King's theme certainly delves into the human soul. With him we discover that wherever terrors arise, they all end up disturbing the original essence of men, taking root, and creating beings from which, throughout our lives, we try to look away.

What are his problems?

This comment will not refer to a particular work, because of the titles I have read, I have not been able to finish reading them. I was an enthusiastic reader of this author for some time. I bought more books than I managed to read at the time. When I dedicated myself to catching up, I came across a discovery that I had sensed for some time: disillusionment, and the enormous question of why such a talented author is capable of such mediocre texts. Mediocre in the sense of a certain kind of language that dominates his style.

King's problems are several: 1) Stretching the development of stories and/or scenes to inconceivable limits, which sometimes has good results, as in *Cujo*, but which in most cases becomes vile and monotonous. The intention is to produce tension in the reader, and the story can also gain in tension and drama. But this resource requires precise language, with moments of tense drama alternating with others of relaxation, a certain subtle humor and the necessary tragedy for the end. The ingredients that King puts for this are arbitrary: sometimes the story is not sufficiently credible and sometimes even absurd, other times the language revels in gratuitous, scatological and crude macabre effects in order to stretch the scene even further. 2) Excessive detail in the action scenes, which I imagine is intended to give a sense of reality and familiarity to a fantastic or supernatural setting and event (the fight between the woman and the dog in *Cujo*, the multiple fights in *Needful Things*), mixed with the usual remarks from the characters, almost always vulgar rather than colloquial. It is true that King is an author who has been characterized by rediscovering the strange in contemporary everyday settings, and North American society, with its peculiarities and defects that he is very careful to highlight, is his object of study. But Zola would have done something else if he had dedicated himself to writing fantastic literature. His characters spoke crudely, and the author did not hesitate to point out obscene gestures and vulgar responses. But when writing literature this was filtered by the criterion of good taste, which is nothing more than a kind of invisible sieve that helps to make a work of art effective. Less is more, it has always been said. And that more is excessively dangerous. It can be the soul of a style, as in Faulkner or Proust, but it can become a self-inflicted aggression if the author does not know how to control himself. Why does King write so much? Why does he write so many novels and publish so many? Editorial commitments, spiritual need. I would like to believe that the second option is the correct one. The need to get rid of so many chaotic and terribly conceived inner worlds is essential. It is always kinder to think that even if the result is a failure, it comes from something inevitable and not from a contractual commitment. Even if it were so, well, it is a book, nothing more. It is not going to change the world. But for a follower of his work, and if he is also a demanding reader, as we all should

be, reading a minor work is like being content with poorly prepared or burnt food, which we must leave aside unfinished. 3) The next problem is the one already mentioned in the previous items. The tendency towards scatology and bad taste are excessive. I repeat that it may be intended to reflect the language and the point of view of the character, but I insist that when we are writing literature there is a handling of colloquial language that must be used for the good of the text. A literary work is not a photograph, even when portraying parallel worlds, it is not a recording, Zola, a paradigmatic case of naturalism, that is why I quote him, knew it very well. And if the objective is to create another reality, recreating reality with those methods and resources (vulgarity and bad taste, perhaps kitsch, although it does not resemble it at all) does not seem valid to me for this type of literature either. King does not seem to be oriented towards that mixture of absurdity and gothic, but rather his dramas are contemporary horror fictions. That is what brings him close to the point of marveling and shuddering in his best works. 4) Another technical problem with King is the tendency for the character to constantly make mental annotations. Sometimes with the intention of relaxing the tension in a violent scene, sometimes as a temporal and spatial reference when comparing the character with a character in a book or movie), and even when the plot is about the character hearing voices or telepathy being the theme, I don't think it's a good idea to overuse the resource. Sometimes these annotations become ridiculous, even. This serves to move on to the next problem. 5) King uses, this time invariably and whatever the plot is about, comparisons. He uses them at any time, and in most cases the image does not need to be reinforced by a comparison, since it is already tremendous and implacable. When this happens, the comparison is at the expense of the original image, even ruining the effect that it had produced on us. When the comparison is trivial, let's be condescending and overlook the flaw, but sometimes the comparison is inadequate and most of the time grotesque, vulgar and totally out of place. The purpose of the comparison is to reinforce the initial image, perhaps even to give the author's personal feeling, which collaborates with the climate and style, to add up. Let's now look at the works that led me to make these comments. Christine has a very well-done first part, when the narrator, part witness and part main character, describes the events and the characteristics of the main characters. King always characterizes his characters very well, they are very real and very visual, both in their appearance and in their way of acting and speaking (when he doesn't go overboard with vulgar colloquialisms). In this case, they are two teenagers, and the language is quite measured in that aspect. But in the second part we move to a third-person narration, the story begins to stretch with secondary situations. The bad guys, the typical group of bad boys from school in King's novels, become stereotyped. Despite the great psychological work of these evil characters, a mix of mental illness and possession, that King does in other novels, it doesn't stand out here. In the third part, the plot loses interest, not because the actions are not continuous and interesting (all of King's plots are disturbing, deep in many

senses and dimensions) but because they are not accompanied by the language. The storm of the century is the script of a television movie. It is usual that a good text for theater, television or cinema is read with the same interest as when watching the play. Sometimes the sensation is greater because our imagination is not invaded by the faces of the actors we saw acting. In this script, none of that happens, the disturbing appears only as a technical aspect, even the dialogues are saturated with stage directions for camera changes. Why does he do this, if it is the director's job? Why doesn't King dedicate himself to emphasizing the drama in the script, the terrifying forces that he wants to transmit to us. The film is very well made, and in it there is everything that I expected to read in the script, and did not find. You can tell me: it is a script. It is true, but Miller's *The Witches of Salts* is also a script if we are talking about that, and what is the lesson of this drama: that the emotion is not in the vision of the staging, but in the drama that we are reading and that our imagination reproduces. A good script does not have to be different from a good novel, a good essay or poem, in every genre the reader recreates positively if the text has the necessary elements and in the right measure. We move on to *Possession and Despair*. They are two novels called twins because they have similar plots and were written one under King's name and the other under his most usual pseudonym, Richard Bachman. In both cases we have a group of ordinary people, another typical resource of King, with certain stereotypes of mixtures of cultures and ages (the writer, the policeman, the father of the family, the single woman, the boy or girl, the dog, etc.) placed in a dramatic and inexplicable situation that challenges them to survival. We have to read more than 200 or 300 pages, sometimes until near the end, to understand what happens. It is interesting to stretch out stories, to provoke anticipation to the point of wanting to turn the pages to see what happens. But I wonder if a writer wants his readers to turn the pages. Isn't it better for the reader to enjoy the language, for the style to lead him without realizing it, preparing him, creating the inner atmosphere for the outcome? And when the end comes, it is not at the level of expectations. It may be logical, even interesting, but it is not enough, I tell myself, for so much prior expectation, so many pages where nothing happens other than crime after crime. It will be said that this is the plot, the way of killing and the tension that surrounds this drama, but I insist that the problem is the language and the style, the way in which we transmit what we want to express. *Insomnia* is a novel with a more careful language, almost poetic in some fragments. The characterization of the old man, the main protagonist, is excellent, as is the climate and the atmosphere of the auras. The dreamlike style is handled very well by King. But we get close to the final third of the novel and things are revealed to us that at first seem to evolve very well. The visions of those strange beings remain in the quality of the disturbing while not revealing too much, and they stand out by contrast with common life and the troubles and sadness of human beings. However, these strange beings are having their explanation, and it is interesting that King dares to enter those quasi-mythological realms, where the

supernatural and superhuman also have hierarchies and where resentments and fights last for centuries. As in Homer, these gods have human characteristics, and they need men to fight their battles. Men are instruments, and sometimes they must decide for themselves, because the power of these gods is also limited. All this is very well. The problem, in my opinion, is that despite so much work, sometimes It fails to produce that sensation of tremendous uncertainty, of loss and disorientation that we should feel as readers, as humans. Where is the emotion, the quintessential human characteristic? What is literature, after all, even if we talk about extraterrestrial beings, if not the allegory of the human condition? And language, for God's sake, we need the appropriate language. It is a peculiar case. King works excellently with the sensations of childhood and its fears. Children are permanent victims, they are exposed to all dangers, and in this novel they go from merely human threats (beating parents, murderers, older children who abuse them) to the following supernatural threats. The children's fears feed the forces that in turn exterminate them. The seven characters are very well developed. The description of the city of Derry and its strange history in the interludes are almost reminiscent of Hawthorne and Faulkner. Even the novel's enormous length is not felt until the last 200 of the 1,500 pages. And it happens, as usual, when the language goes overboard. In the last part, two temporal situations, so well handled in the rest, become excessively repetitive, the colloquial and vulgar language, measured until then, is exacerbated, the macabre and scatological become artificial. The marvelousness of the final confrontation, already imaginative, is lost by the language. The emotion, a central element, determined by Bill's feeling for his brother George, becomes sentimental and effective. The idea of It and the Turtle, of good and evil, fighting in a small middle-class American town, where only children can fight these threats, because they are the victims and the final prize, is extremely interesting. But it seems to me that King does not leave It with enough darkness for us to imagine it with our own fears. King makes It speak almost with the same language as adults. It is a psychologically interesting resource, but I don't know if it is well-founded. I mean, I find it a bit capricious, almost as if the author had no other resource than to make any character, fantastic or not, speak in the way of speaking of a middle-class American. Wouldn't silence and ambiguity be better? King has always opted for the opposite element, the excessive, but what about language and the emotional and intellectual force of language? The Tommyknockers is quite mediocre, all the aforementioned elements are also in this novel. Science fiction does not seem to be a genre that King masters with mastery. The only notable fragment, very notable, to the point of being almost a separate story worthy of appearing in one of his anthologies, is the fragment dedicated to Hilly Brown. The way in which in a few pages he develops the characteristics of such a peculiar child is masterful. Firestarter is not even worth mentioning, and in Needful Things, except for some well-written fragments like the suicide of a 10-year-old boy who believes himself responsible for the death of a woman, one wonders why the Devil needs a

VHS videotape to show the accident of the policeman's wife. The dark half is a good novel, up to a point. The idea and the plot are very interesting, almost a spin-off of *The Dead Zone*, the ending is very well done, but here the development is arbitrary, with unliterary language in certain fragments, and above all it goes overboard in the descriptions of Stark's corpse. Reveling in the repugnant is an element of morbidity that goes against any novel, it seems to me. *The Stand* is another novel with a great idea, good development in certain fragments, a good mysterious character, Randall Flagg, but it is spoiled by multiple unnecessary scenes and fragments that are excessively scatological and even ridiculous for the plot. *Carrie* should have been a short story, removing the interview fragments. As I read, King himself added parts for publication as a novel. It is poorly written (here I agree with Norman Mailer). De Palma's film is much better than the novel, as a final product, I mean.

Now it is my turn to mention the books where King stands out as one of the best contemporary writers, which I have read some time ago and led me to admire him. *The Dead Zone* is one of his most discreet novels, elegantly written and disturbing for what it suggests. King works very well with the psychological aspects of psychopaths, and in some plots he includes secondary stories that seem to have no relation to the central one, but that enhance it. The story of the psychopath is linked to *Cujo*, where that feeling of evil is reincarnated. *Cujo* is another excellent novel, where the resource of stretching a scene for hundreds of pages is perfectly achieved. The only scene where the implausible is the one thing that runs the risk of ruining the novel, due to the tendency noted to excessive detail that can lead to absurdity, is in the confrontation between the dog and the woman. In any case, he does not fall into too many low blows and comes out unscathed. The stories in *Nightfall* are magnificent, worthy heirs to the Bradbury tradition with an absolutely personal touch and a well-defined, measured and concentrated style. What a difference between *Children of the Corn* and *It*, what a difference between *I Am the Door* and *The Tommyknockers*, brevity is sometimes more powerful than the dead weight of thousands of pages. It is not that a long novel or stretching out a situation is implicitly bad. In *Cujo* we have already seen the opposite, in *Gerald's Game*, the good effect of this procedure is repeated, to which another resource is added that was not successful in other novels. Here there is a twist, moving the narration to explain the background of the man who is supposedly threatening the protagonist. He begins to explain, but as in the best moments of *It* and throughout *The Dead Zone*, the resource of the semi-journalistic chronicle is a very valid resource that clarifies and at the same time hides, gives clues to the reader but leaves the necessary sectors in the shadows. Yes, he says, there is a psychopath, there is a psychological explanation, but deeper down there is something else, something inexplicable, something that is not shown. In *The Langoloids* (from *Four After Midnight*, magnificent novels) the situation of the group exposed to a dangerous situation is repeated, but unlike other novels, the mystery is very well handled and the explanation is astonishing and very original. It is



the hackneyed theme of time, but the conception of the idea seems new, and of course, the appropriate length and the language collaborate perfectly. *The Shining* and *Jerusalem's Lot* are two very well-written initial novels, with the imprint of *The Dead Zone*. In the second one, certain doubts can be seen in the plausibility of some passages, such as when a boy and a woman kill a vampire. At times it is not credible, as it happens in some of the more absurd but more successful situations in other novels. In *The Shining* the dreamlike element is very well developed and presented, even better than in *Insomnia*. In *Jerusalem's Lot* the chronicle of a city is very well expressed, and it is not spoiled by artificial and excessive resources as in *It*. The novels of *The Four Seasons* are perfect, a clear balance between human and supernatural forces, where the latter are only an excuse for the development of plots that penetrate the depths of human nature. *The Body*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Gifted Pupil* and *The Breathing Method* are magnificent examples of King's mastery. The stories in *Nightmares* and *Hallucinations* are very varied, there are some excellent ones like *Dolan's Cadillac*, and another that reminds me of *The Stand*, and like the novel, it is not successful, in my opinion. But there are other magnificent stories, like *The Moving Finger*, *The Rainy Season*, etc. We also see here the variety of registers that he is capable of, when he enters the lyrical and pastoral world of *The Little Pony*, or the Conan Doyle style in *The Case of the Doctor*. The short story is perhaps the optimal medium for the best of King, but it is a pity that he has also been declining in this sense. This third collection of stories follows *Skeleton Crew*, published in parts, and which undoubtedly follows *Nightfall* in quality. *The Expedition* and *The Fog*, short story and novella, are the best that can be found in fantasy literature. I leave *Pet Sematary* for last, in my opinion the best long novel I have read by King. Here there is a permanent tension that does not come from the events themselves, but from a constant anxiety and expectation. There is something that is going to happen, there is something that oppresses the reader's chest, because he feels, thanks to the narrative skill, the optimal language, the barely hinted clues, the justly revealed myth, that something terrible is about to happen. The ending, although dangerously close to excess, is useful and necessary in this case, and succeeds completely in what it wants to express: the thrill of the protagonist when he feels that beloved and yet unknown hand on his shoulder is the thrill that the reader must feel when reading it. There is still much to read from King, much more than has already been read.

#### Hearts in Atlantis (1999)

This book by King is composed of two novels (*Campones con Chaquetas Amarillos* and *Hearts in Atlantis*), two relatively long stories (*Willie el ciego* and *¿Qué estamos en Vietnam?*) and a final epilogue. The best, in my opinion, are the two stories. If we talk about the two novels, we will see

that, despite being much better written than other previous texts by King, that is, they have a greater control of the use of colloquialism, the excesses to which he has accustomed us and the failed endings, they lack the sufficiency. It forces you to highlight them above the average effectiveness of many of his other texts without much transcendence or literary value. The first novel tells us the world of the protagonist's childhood, as efficiently as King knows how to do it. The character of the mother is very well developed in her characteristics according to the son's point of view. The idea of the fantastic, the reality of the Dark Tower and the Crimson King of Insomnia, crossing paths with the "real" world, is still interesting, but it is a shame the way King's language falls short, it does not excite, it does not disturb with that average use of language that does not allow itself poetry or music.

But if we move on to the stories, we find something else. This only confirms that short texts suit King well. In *Blind Willie* we find a character whose journey is described in the present tense. Thus, the reader gradually discovers that this person is in turn three people, and then, as the memories add up, we see that he has been another or others. The difference is that the three faces present are deliberate, and concretized through disguises. This schizophrenia is given in a sparse, measured, restrained language, but which nevertheless retains a tension that resembles anguish and desperation. One can feel Willie's anger, even if we do not agree with his behavior; his is not physically violent, but psychologically violent. We know that at any moment he will explode, but for now his mind has survived the intense traumas of the past (the Vietnam War), forming boxes, one containing the other like a Pandora's box. The ending is disturbing and stands out as one of the best endings of any of King's texts: Willie senses, imagines with undoubted certainty, that he is not the only one who performs these mental maneuvers, and knows that from now on he must take care of the others.

In the other story mentioned, we find a King evocative of the past. A man goes to the funeral of a friend he met in Vietnam, and this serves as a reminder to evoke traumatic episodes of the war and the whole life of frustration that has followed. There is a continuous back and forth journey between the past and the present, skillfully and elegantly handled. Even the use of the fantastic element is only a poetic, allegorical means that King has managed to bring with delicacy and bitter humor: the protagonist dies of a heart attack in a traffic jam, but he does not know that he is dying. He thinks he sees a shower of inanimate objects, things that we discover as if they were rescued from the recent past as museum pieces. It is an extremely beautiful image, perhaps one of King's most moving. The ghost that haunts the protagonist, an old mama-san, is also a disturbing ghost but not terrifying. These are fears that are born from the character himself, not monsters of capricious origin for which the author must give explanations. The fewer explanations there are, the more evocative they are of the human condition. Reading these two stories does not make us lose anything

from the rest that we have discarded. There are references to characters and events from other stories that are merely secondary and decorative elements that do not tarnish in any way or produce the sensation that something is missing. One and the other explain each other, both complement each other better than the novels that accompany them.

Alberto Ramponelli

Viene con la noche (2005) Apuntes para una biografía (2009)

The author's third novel, and the product of both personal and literary maturity, it is, perhaps, Ramponelli's best novel. An independent fragment of a literary world that has its interconnections with the other two novels, *El último fuego*, especially, and with *viene con la noche*, but here more in the climate and the theme than in the plot. In the first novel we find a dark atmosphere, a strangeness that reminds us in part of a black and white film from the sixties and in a Bradbury-esque tone, and also a certain hermeticism given by the coldness and the conciseness of the language, always precise, measured, studied, with a sharp and bitter elegance at the same time.

The second novel maintains the language, but we find a certain luminosity that alleviates the gloom and strangeness of the novel. This light comes through certain elements that are more familiar to the reader, more palpable in their everyday life: the neighborhood, the women, the police events. In both, ambiguity is an essential characteristic that determines their identity. A characteristic that also represents a risk, an aesthetic and formal choice that carries its pros and cons. Many readers would prefer a more effective, clearer and abrupt choice of plot. However, both content and container go hand in hand, they fit perfectly into each other in Ramponelli's texts. The tone is unique, peculiar to the author, therefore the treatment of the plot, similar in its The author, faithful to himself and without any intention of making any concessions, is also in keeping with this tone. Form and content feed off each other to produce a result, a fruit that may not have bright colors because the substances that form it come from aspects long hidden in the soul of men, and that Ramponelli has taken it upon himself to rescue, to bring to light for the necessary time that it takes us to open the book and read it.

The language is extremely careful and precise, the tone chosen is also very controlled, it only tends to overflow in the appropriate areas, where the tension requires it, and even then it does so very superficially. The tension is enhanced by the resource of revealing little about the characters, their personalities always remain in an ambiguous zone, because mystery is their

main quality. What is not said is derived from the actions, and although the dialogues are clear and transparent, they take place precisely in the superficial or everyday zone. This helps the reader feel that witches, good or bad, can live in any neighbor's house. The plot also leaves no loose ends, it explains and reasons through dialogues and thoughts so that the character unravels the mystery that surrounds him. The reader follows these arguments as in a detective novel, a genre to which it is close in style, at least partially. As in the author's previous novel (*The Last Fire*) the strange is born from the everyday and even from what seems banal. The point of view alternates according to the characters, although the limited omniscient of the protagonist predominates. There are no excessive events in the real plane, everything fantastic occurs in the dream plane, therefore the mystery, by remaining ambiguous and imprecise, does not lose its capacity to disturb, because it is never completely revealed, but rather the possible and varied answers are hinted at. What the protagonists know when they confront each other, they know by transiting that other zone that the reader accesses at times. The reader does not doubt the answers, but it is not explained to him, not if they demonstrate with grandiloquent acts or magic. The result of this technique is curious: a mixture of a novel with certain local features, a fantastic and police plot, sometimes journalistic in its austerity. But above all, always faithful to a style and a sober language committed to expressive resources.

The language has very defined, very personal peculiarities. Influences from other authors can be found, it is true, but they are not entirely clear, since it is a new literary product, where more than influences we can now speak of relationships and purposes or common climates. Hemingway's literature can be smelled in the precision, Faulkner's tragic gaze in the determinism implicit in the destinies of the characters, the fantastic anchored in the ambiguity of the literature of Kafka or Bruno Schulz. But these associations are more than anything the intuitions of an attentive reader, of a reader who knows that each author is the product of many others, and at the same time a unique contribution to the world of fiction literature and its history. As we said, then, the author's language tends toward austerity, an economy in description, a precision in actions, an evasion of easy sentimentality. The emotional goes through the intellectual, through the implicit associations that the plot creates in the reader's mind. Although they are not police plots, more than a personal conflict there is a psycho-social complexity, that is, a mutual feeding between the personal and the social. Both levels, which also in these novels have their symbolic parallelism in the reality-imagination axis, could not exist without the other, giving each other the same importance. And although there seems to be a war between the two, which is in turn the substance of the plots and their peculiar flavor, there is never a winner, and the resolution is always a neutrality that may disappoint those seeking literary fireworks, but which is in accordance with the bitter vision that the author proposes to us, a vision of a man or woman immersed in the middle point, fluctuating between both worlds. Notes for a Biography stands out first of all for its structure. It is made up of ten

chapters, the first and last of which serve as an introduction and epilogue, while the rest constitute a series of stories related to the plot set out in the introduction. It would not be entirely accurate to call them stories, for the simple fact that there is no resolution or closed ending, because the plot of each of them fluctuates between the particularity of each story and the main axis of the novel. In reality they are parallel constructions, simultaneous stories, divergences from the great plot of the world created by the author, through which we find a new way of looking at Edward Echenique, the protagonist. It is that if there is no exclusive protagonist, because Echenique is only the axis on which the others converge or rotate as in orbits that tend dangerously to collapse. The parallel stories can be read, however, as independent stories that have their value in themselves, but that require new nourishment and a greater explanation to be fully understood. The value of these texts is precisely in that uncertainty that we spoke of before, and that in this case extends from the plot to the form chosen to express it. For this reason, the author is evidently committed to language and not only to history. It is not only about telling, he seems to tell us, but finding adequate ways to do so.

In *Notes for a Biography* we find other peculiarities with respect to language. It is a little more overflowing than in the previous novels, we find longer sentences that gain an emotional, intellectual character due to the way sought, but at the same time arising from an open channel through the grammatical musicality of the soul and thought of the author. The plot of each story has several levels: the superficial level, referring to the particular plot of each one, another deeper level, associated with the more or less direct relationships with Echenique, and another even deeper level, where the particular meanings of these secondary characters acquire psychological intensity: the guilt of the soldier Pérez, the anger of the islander Santos, the resentment (incest, perhaps?) in the case of Mirna, the fear of death in the case of Suly. But many other representations can be added to these, as many as there are readers.

The other essential element to mention is the fantastic. The fantastic in Ramponelli is an intermediate point between reality and fiction, a confluence between both, creating a different product. But this new "place" is not a place where the characters can move, but a literary resource that allows us to understand the difficulty that the characters have in living between both levels. The magic in *The Last Fire*, the sorcery in *It Comes with the Night*, or the mystical connotations in *Notes for a Biography*, which also includes references to telepathic theories, extraterrestrials, and relations with Nazism, are not elements placed at random or to patch up flaws in the plot, nor are they forced or artificial explanations. They are part of the plots, being and not being at the same time the most important part of the result. Without them, the novels would not be the same, yes, valid for their formal, everyday or psychological plot, but less complex. The richness of these novels is in this eventual, almost spontaneous and at the same time natural presence of the supernatural as another part of the

everyday. And the merit of this verisimilitude is, once again, in the language. The tone is undoubtedly reminiscent of a chronicle rather than a memory, with a quasi-journalistic intention but leaving aside the merely anecdotal to delve into darker places and accepting, above all, uncertainty as a more real element than what is proven. Using the first-person voice, which would seem counterproductive to this objective, accentuates the importance of the facts, leaving ideas in a secondary plane, and allowing the impressions themselves to have their implicit character of subjectivity. The result is a by-product of the chronicle or the apocryphal biography, which makes this Ramponelli novel the one that comes closest to Borges.

Finally, I must highlight the highest points of these stories. *Gente rara* is undoubtedly one of the author's most intense stories, where the precision of the language highlights the invisible and certain presence of what is not said. *Postales del sur* is, in my opinion, one of the most accomplished stories, or the most accomplished, of all of Ramponelli's work. The soldier's relationship with the vague character that is Echenique, a fraud and a mystic, a storyteller and a criminal at the same time, is a relationship that is transferred both to the social and political level as well as to that of guilt and remorse. Echenique fears the black bird of death, which he hears but cannot see, a threat that has its counterpoint in the remorse of the soldier Pérez for his participation in the massacre of a family during the Malvinas war. The language here acquires an emotionality that Ramponelli rarely abandons and that is why it is more effective and moves in a different and exquisite way. Finally, another high point is *It Always Rains in Paris*. Here, too, psychological meanings are exchanged with sentimental ones, Suly's love for her father. The dreamlike participates as a secondary element, but mainly contributes paranormal connotations due to its relationship with Echenique. And it is above all the language and the structure that make this story stand out. Like almost everything, there is a round trip between the past and the present, even the future sneaks in.

Daniel Durand

El Krech (1998) *El cielo de Boedo* (2005) *Ruta de la inversión* (2007)

Durand's poetry is elusive to classification. It has traits, in terms of theme, of urban poetry, a slight edge tone at times, where the colloquial always prevails but filtered by the poet's melancholic gaze. Perhaps this is the main sensation it provokes, a certain melancholy not for something that has been lost or something that is sought, but for the present. In practically all the poems of the last two books mentioned there is a feeling of indefinite sadness that is not denoted by the poet's words, but by the climate that they create. And that is true poetry, it seems to me, not to beat around the

bush with high-sounding words, but for the words to yield their meaning to a whole, and for not even one verse to stand out for itself more than for the emotion it creates. Here the emotion is more than anything a permanent state of restless uncertainty. We only know what we see in the sky of our neighborhood, in its streets, the cobblestones and the sidewalks, the girls across the street, the bicycles and the businesses. All this becomes - in sporadic and subtle mentions, never unnecessary enumerations - material for another less concrete substance: the present state of not knowing more than what we feel. The disappointment in love, friends, work, the slow neighborhood afternoons, are elements of *Ruta de la inversión*. In *El cielo de Boedo* there is, in the manner of "The Four Seasons," a conscientious description of the changes caused by the weather in the streets of the neighborhood, so detailed that it seems almost pointless. But the things described tell something that does not enter through the usual senses, they crowd and accumulate in us, a deposit that not only stores but digests what it receives. *Krech* is something different in the subject matter, not in the poetic resources, always exact and original. Here there is an imaginary world and a plot only suggested by a mixture of images that can hardly be classified. The apparent delirium in this case is productive because there is an almost futuristic atmosphere well constructed by the austere suggestions.

This is the main thing, it seems to me. Durand does not need big words to force the reader to imagine, he only suggests, he only mentions and the rest is done by the reader's imagination.

Nadine Gordimer

History of my son (1991) Caprice of nature (1987)

These two novels by Nadine Gordimer have as their predominant theme and inevitable background the South African society and apartheid. Her literature enters the political sphere, her literature is political, because she applies to her way of life - and therefore to her work - the criterion that everything we do is political: the way we act inevitably influences others. Whether it is a feeling or an act, in the end it has its reaction in the other, like an expansive wave that is sometimes as unexpected and subtle as silence. And silence is part of the characters in her novels, only a part, because when the silence of complicity is finally overcome, the protagonists act, commit themselves and therefore suffer for their convictions. She has shown that political literature can be made without ideas overwhelming the reader or saturating the plot. Because the stories are the characters, and although they speak and proclaim ideas, shared or not by the reader, the latter is hearing and seeing the actors and not the author. Gordimer has

the skill and talent to narrate with apparent simplicity terrible stories that, like a bomb, explode to surprise us at the most unexpected moment. But not with gruesome effects, but with elegant subtlety of language and style. We cannot find commonplaces in a single sentence. Her narrative resources are varied: the point of view that rotates from character to character, the changes of time, the use of the present almost as an immediate past, the anticipation of events almost in a journalistic burst but never remaining there, the telling through suggestion what one character might think or do in relation to another. In *Historia de mi hijo* the narrator is the son who tells the story of his father, with all the psychological and emotional connotations that this implies. In *Capricho de la naturaleza* the point of view placed on the main character, simple and plain, expands until it becomes an epic work, where the character is surrounded by voices and situations beyond his influence, like a camera that first focuses on just one and then moves away and encompasses many hundreds, but the character continues to distinguish himself. by contrast. It takes talent and narrative skill to achieve this: the mix of psychology, human behavior, conflicting emotions, racial hatred, socioeconomic description and high narrative quality. I wish telling stories like hers were as simple as she makes it seem, but the apparent fluidity slides over many years that have lubricated the author's artistic mechanisms.

#### There's Something Out There (1984)

If Gordimer's novelistic narrative is a continuous success between context and content, that is, a stylistically mature language and a serious theme also approached with maturity, her short stories represent an example, perhaps more finished than her novels, of her skill and talent for narration. Each story is a part of the world she describes, but at the same time it is a complete world with its own logic. To the austerity of adjectives to which she has accustomed us and the stark vision of society that is almost her thematic axis, is added the ruthless vision of the protagonists of these stories. They do not need to use adjectives to let us know what they are like; sometimes they do not even know what they are really like, worried about surviving in a community, as in all communities in fact, where what is important is not what one feels or thinks, but what one says or does. Hence these characters have an interior that they do not know, and that even makes them commit acts whose real meaning they do not fully appreciate. Their near innocence makes them more cruel than their probable malice. Let us look, for example, at the woman in *A City of the Dead*, a *City of the Living*, who denounces a fugitive apartheid militant, whose cause she says she agrees with, but who has broken the serene tranquility that she wanted for her family. Or Kafka's father, whose letter is so logically true that it seems more like the edge of a knife than a letter. Other stories (*Crimes of Conscience*) tell us how political militancy



becomes part of a personality, and not just one facet of it. Because defending a noble cause can lead us to kill, to hate, and also to form a part of the love of a couple, even forgiveness. There is also room for reflection on the unexpected evolution of human feelings in ordinary people, without political commitments: a couple who have saved up to buy a villa in Italy for their retirement, see their plans altered when he falls in love with another woman; a black woman who serves in the house of a white family, accepts into her home the wife and children of her lover who has just died; or the relationship apparently without conflicts between a mother and her daughter as a result of a free and open education, can bring about the extreme consequences that they always wanted to avoid. In the final story, almost a short novel, *There's Something Out There*, a series of crimes and destruction in the city is the background of a story that tells how four political activists take refuge in a white neighborhood to prepare an attack on a power station. In this story there are several levels: the white couple who serve as a screen, the two black boys who hide with them, the couple at the real estate agency who rent the house and represent the status quo of Afrikaans society, and alternating these stories, the acts of violence carried out by a monkey or baboon that no one has seen clearly. The allegory is obvious but no less disturbing. Nothing is ever made explicit, it is only taken for granted as something implicit between the author and the reader. That is why it is a pleasure to read Gordimer, she always treats the reader as someone at exactly the same level and intelligence as her.

Walter Iannelli

Metano (2008)

The author's second book of short stories, which maintains the quality demonstrated by the first (*Someone is waiting*). Her way of telling stories has established itself in a very particular style, difficult to define or compare with other authors. His is a style that borders on the colloquial, the pleasant and direct language tells us about everyday situations in general, seemingly hollow due to their daily repetition. And yet, something accumulates in the attentive reader, not information or clues as in a detective novel, but a feeling that something is going to happen there. I think it is this direct but not frivolous language that achieves it: a slight patina of melancholy, fear and sadness staining the walls of the paths along which these stories lead us.

In *Those Who Return to Javier's House*, *Life from Teresita*, *A Tale of Roberto Drode*, *The Aleteo of a Butterfly in Beijing* and *Nothing is Not Covered Again*, Iannelli is a master at describing the common man of the city, his sexual, emotional and metaphysical frustrations. There is no humor

in these stories (the everyday and the common are already implied when the reader reads them and remembers his own life), because here we are talking about frustrations and time and lost things, but People, events and talent that are now irrecoverable. What these stories leave behind is a feeling of identification. They don't hurt, they hurt a little, but that wound becomes infected and we see what we didn't see before in ourselves.

There are other stories that are more tinged with irony and humor, for example *Apuntes sobre la obra de Carlos Nonato Zuñiga*, *Carpintero*, *El rincón de las ánimas*, and in them it is only an instrument to tell with another resource situations that are only a little more unlikely. Of these I especially like *Carpintero*, an impeccable treatise on the links between male impotence and the religion of the Western world. A narrative curiosity of how from the personal one can fly to the universal, and then come back down to the personal, already redeemed, consoled but no less frustrated.

The stories *Metano* and *Nada* enter the realm of the fantastic. Both, and especially *Metano*, are perfect stories that have nothing to envy of Ballard's stories. And *The Hunt for the Snipe* contains a poetics that reminds us of Chekhov's stories. A certain *Roberto Drode* seems to me to be an excellent story, both for how well it is narrated and for the ideas it works with. The treatment in the first person hits the mark in the two or three colours that characterise the narrator's character: a mixture of urban customs, humour and resignation to failure. The character goes through various stages where the obsession with *Drode* is the guiding light. The theme of the ownership of ideas is treated with the concern not of an assaulted possessor, but of a thinker. It is not the possession of ideas that worries the narrator. The story is suggesting something else: perhaps the theme of the alter ego, perhaps the theme of the other and the double, precisely another literary item so common that it no longer belongs to anyone. Literature as a theme within literature, with the background of a black comedy. Are my ideas the ones that win competitions, and I, a specific person, the one who loses? Am I the one who does not have enough capacity to write? We always doubt the outcome of our texts. Perhaps, when we think decisively that contests no longer matter so much, that who we are is in who we write, we will be able to get rid of the ghostly *Roberto Drode* who is always hovering over us, goading us and stealing from us at the same time, and we will go back to writing like the main character in *Walter Iannelli's* story.

*Zumatra and the mechanics of your bra* (2005)

The first thing that comes to mind when reading *Walter Iannelli's* poetry is that his language is direct. There are no artifices between the text and the reader. But this apparent simplicity is the result of the choice of a language that has set out to be exact. Exactness is the name to define these poems, it

seems to me. To say, for example, that the universe is found in a piece of cloth, the author does not need many words or a complex syntactical construction. It is something that anyone could have said, perhaps, but not in the way it is said here. Because in this case, simplicity magnifies the content of the poem, like a stone that produces waves when thrown into the still waters that we all have beneath the layers of consciousness. Iannelli's poetry explores with a machete the darkness of a room full of dangerous objects that we did not remember were there. For this reason, each end of the poem leaves a feeling of desolation, as when he compares a woman's back to a wall. In the poems of the Zumatra cycle, the exotic nature of the name gives more credibility to the issues it deals with, which are none other than the useless but always sought hope (such as *Los que espera en Zumatra*), ancestral violence (*Los consorcios de Zumatra*) or the inability to find more than rubble and dirt in the streets that form the minds of men (*Los lavaderos de Zumatra*, one of the best in the book). In these poems, the strange allows us to see what we are as if it were someone else who carries such stigmas. Then comes the return, the reflection that says that Zumatra is nothing more than another name for a place that we all carry within us. But the language grows in complexity towards the second half of the book. In the poem *The Dream*, in my opinion the highest point of the whole, the exact and at the same time elaborate, exquisite language converges with the philosophical and existential content. Here, the name that is not pronounced takes on relief through the images that try to describe it and that raise it towards the end. To that abyss from which the author is willing to shout the name of a race, of a god perhaps, that impossible name that we would all like to hear on those occasions when we ask ourselves what meaning our life has. In an era where poetry is enunciative and enumerative, full of social references or easy emotionality, like still lifes that do not move due to the lack of adequate light (read talent), Iannelli's poems are constructed without commonplaces, with a different poetic language because it fuses philosophical depth with images that sound fresh but mature. It speaks of important facts and things, deeply human. Of those limits between which man walks, with weak handrails, from and towards two imagined abysses. These poems are cruel because what is intuited is always dark, they are also sad, although they sometimes conceal it through humor. But above all they are implacable. However, language, with slow care and effective wisdom, is responsible for rescuing the beauty that still exists in the terrible.

Orlando Romano

Minimal Capsules (2008)

What requirements must a micro-story meet? Like any other literary genre, the range of its possibilities is wide. Perhaps only its brevity is the unique and unwavering sign that defines it. But then what differentiates it from other short texts: journalistic, anecdotal, humorous? I think it is about the literary element, ergo poetic by definition. What degrades poetry is the poor poetics of mediocre poets. What degrades the short story and the novel are bad narrators. What degrades the micro-story are those who confuse brevity with frivolity. If poetry is an exploration of the human soul, so I think, the micro-story has the very difficult task of exploring and explaining it not with metaphors or images as poems try to do, but with the fluid and apparently casual and everyday words of prose. Humor should never be exempt, it is an element that lubricates the path along the tortuous paths that we intend to follow. But one should not confuse lightness and foolishness with irony and lucid and critical acidity.

Romano's micro-stories have reminded me that this genre has the highest possibilities of expression, and has nothing to envy poetry in its intimate and profound exploration.

Should a micro-story be ambiguous or precise? Should it have an open or closed ending? It is true that the reader has to contribute his imagination, but the author's duty is to give the necessary and compelling clues. The micro-story must be specific and not give the opportunity for confusing or contradictory interpretations. Something so brief defines itself, which does not mean that its shock waves do not spread within the reader like any other good literary text. The famous story by Monterroso, in my opinion, is somewhat overrated. It seems to me more of a beginning, a guideline to follow rather than a micro-story. But the texts that Romano offers us seem to me to be the best example of what this literary genre should be. These texts are thematically strong and cruel, ironically forceful like a punch, poetically written and narrated. The apocryphal factor is an almost essential resource in this genre when dealing with certain themes, Borges already knew this very well, and here it is fulfilled with very satisfactory evidence. Orlando has known how to alternate intelligent humor with tragedy, both, as we know, inseparable components of human nature.

Arthur Miller

A Memory of Two Mondays (1955) I Don't Need You Anymore (1967)

A Memory of Two Mondays is a short one-act play, where the only temporal gap is marked by the lights going out at the end of what would be the "first Monday." Then the action starts again without a break. It takes place in an automobile parts warehouse, without any change of scene. It could be

called a chamber play, because of the narrow space, but the number of characters is important, especially because each one has his own characteristic voice. As is typical of Miller, each one can express himself sufficiently in just a few sentences of dialogue. Miller is an author of great stylistic elegance, but he does not skimp on violence and great outpourings in the voices of his characters. They express themselves at the right moments, they cry or scream when they should. They are not necessarily copies of reality, they are Millerian characters, that is to say: hard and sensitive at the same time, pious and cruel at the same time, reserved and exaggerated according to the occasion. What varies their attitudes is the situation, and this is a combination of factors: a gesture or a phrase from someone they can no longer stand, an act seen in the street, accidental or provoked, civil or political, the rain or the heat, a memory that provokes melancholy or anger. Millerian characters are puppets of their emotions, and even their ideas are emotions because they act passionately, even in the stubborn silence that sometimes isolates them.

*I Don't Need You Anymore* (actually, a redundancy of the translation, the original is *I Don't Need You Anymore*) is a collection of stories that shows that Miller is not only a great playwright, but that he masters narrative technique like the best American narrators. His experience with the theater gives him the subtle and detailed vision of the characters' attitudes, their actions of apparent futility but always essential to understand their emotional and psychological nature. All these stories have a skin-deep sensitivity that never falls into cheap blows, the characters are never explained, but are lived and recreated by the narrator's voice. They all show a double nature: Tony from *The Night of the Shipowners*, who seeks an easy and irresponsible life, is also capable of the most useless sacrifice; Cleota from *The Omen*, whose contradictory feelings are nevertheless capable of maintaining the cold order of appearances; or Gay from *The Misfits*, who boasts of being free but knows that in order to survive he must make a pact with the society from which he wants to escape. *I Don't Need You Anymore* is a splendid story that describes in detail, to the point close to the strange madness of childhood, the conflicting feelings of a five-year-old boy. Miller makes us relive the fears, the disappointments, the desperation that a boy feels at that age. The desperation that makes us feel love and anger at the same time, the imperative need to be approved and to hate those on whom we depend. To love and hit loved ones. The desperation to communicate what we do not know how to communicate. That is why we hurt with words that we do not fully know what they mean: four words like four weapons thrown at the same time.

Ricardo Güiraldes

*Don Segundo Sombra* (1926)

The last novel published by the author, at the age of 40, is the most famous of his production, also considered the best of all his work. Without a doubt, this is so, but the factors that pigeonhole it within the so-called gaucho literature in secondary education condemn it to be relegated to a marginal area with respect to literature in general. Except for a few prestigious exceptions, such as Borges, few are those who highlight its merits as great literature beyond its correlations with Hernández's *Martín Fierro* and other productions with a rural theme. Perhaps what best encapsulates the philosophy of this novel can be found in a sentence on the last page, when the narrator-protagonist sees Sombra leaving, and says the following: "...that which was moving away was more an idea than a man." For this reason, this novel does not have the title character as its main protagonist. Although he is a main character, he actually serves as a technical support, let's say, for the protagonist, but mainly as a spiritual guide, on the dramatic and existential level for the aforementioned protagonist. The plot takes us from the narrator's childhood through a successful structure of recollection, with two or three temporal pauses where, like milestones, the narrator stops to recapitulate his life until then, without representing a flashback per se, but rather forming one more part of the linear narrative structure. The encounter with Don Segundo Sombra is the most important of these episodes, of course. If at first the protagonist's choice to follow him seems arbitrary, it is because we do not yet know him completely. He is, up to this point, a boy, and although he is the adult who is narrating, his point of view is in keeping with the era he is narrating. The reasons why the old gaucho has such an influence on our protagonist will be seen later. The language chosen by the author has smoothed out the symbolist excesses of his other novels and has given rise to two other types of styles: the localist (in dialogues and descriptions), and the purely literary, undoubtedly the most successful, which with its neutrality makes a kind of adequate conversion. All these elements are not shocking, but pleasantly balanced. There is a poetics that does not gloat over the characteristics of the gaucho and his customs. The descriptive is anecdotal, except when it comes to the landscape. This is another protagonist of the novel; it is in fact the symbiosis where the deepest part of the characters merges: the personal maturation of the narrator and the always veiled personality, shown reluctantly, of Don Segundo. The scenes of harnessing, taming, and fighting have the rawness of reality described in a tone that borders on the metaphorical, and this is a credit to the French symbolist influence. It is also a fact that Sombra is not the man who gives lessons or puts himself in the position of a moralist based on his experience. His words are brief, harsh, with a cynicism that is sometimes very sharp. The protagonist's journey of learning and maturing is strewn with successes based on hard work well done and some disappointments of failure and the shame of someone who is learning his first steps.

The themes of this novel are many, but perhaps the main one is that of the loneliness to which every man is condemned. Every man, it seems to tell us, is one in front of the landscape, whatever it may be. of the pampas or the sea, even when the protagonist stands in front of the crab farms and feels exposed and defenseless against these animals that could eat him away like the horses trapped in the mud. Animals that also seem to pray to a personal god every evening when they look at the sunset and extend their claws. The theme of God and religion is another important theme, but it is treated from an aspect that tends to be skeptical, like that of someone who has failed in his beliefs. As a corollary, we add that Güiraldes did not stop conceiving his work, especially the narrative, as a world that his texts were in charge of showing in part. Sombra has already appeared in a story from his book of stories, and in another published in the magazine Plus Ultra in 1916. The Galvns are the landowners who are the protagonists of Raucha, who appears as an almost definitive friend of our protagonist narrator. This is important, not only as an expression of a kind of fictionalized autobiography, which would be the least of it, but because of the larger idea of creating a world of its own where the "real" elements are simple ingredients that the author's imagination and emotional intelligence will transform into something more transcendent. A world with its own laws, its beginning and its end, where Rosaura will be able to live in the same era as Don Segundo Sombra, where Raucha will be able to make contact with the protagonist of Xamaica. Two or more worlds that coexist, the countryside and the urban, the austere, crude and proud morality of the gaucho, the life of the rich landowners who are imbued with European culture, the isolated, submissive, resigned life of the women of the town or the proud and violent defense of the women of the countryside.

The Crystal Cowbell (1915) Tales of Death and Blood (1915) Raucha (1917)  
Rosaura (1918) Xamaica (1923)

This Argentine writer, who died prematurely at the age of 41 from lymphatic cancer, is too often pigeonholed in the so-called gaucho literature for his famous Don Segundo Sombra, but the books we are now dealing with show a wide range of literary resources and it is easy to see a methodical learning itinerary. He published his first two books at the age of 29, one of poetry and another of stories. The first shows him influenced by modernism, but without the excessively rhetorical overtones of Rubn Daro. It is a more localist modernism, with symbolist influences in the most successful poems, and even some surrealist overtones. But the final result, although perhaps novel for the time - according to the comments of specialists, for its disruptive images, its colloquialisms immersed within academic structures, the strange challenge of certain visual images mixed with auditory elements and vice versa - the final impression, then, is not that of a book of poems that is entirely homogeneous nor successful. The

poems that stand out the most are those where the simplicity of the image prevails, the short verses and the precise and delicate image, even a certain novelty in the barely sought metaphor, for example: the clouds bleed, or the night has fallen asleep, lying on the plain. The prose poems, undoubtedly modernist in their theme and style, are the most inconsequential in my opinion, even though the author, conscious of this influence, deliberately made these poems imitative in which he tries to introduce an ironic and parody vein. Güiraldes was a great reader, a frequent visitor to Europe, where he absorbed important readings and first learned to get used to the authors' dreams and then to follow their style. For this reason this book of poems stands out for the heterogeneity of its poetics, its brilliant colors in the images, the audacity of the same, the sought-after break with the classic, the parody and simplicity alternating both in form and content. The final result, except for some good poems, has suffered the passage of time.

The book of short stories, however, shows him more settled, more secure, and the results are far superior. If we look with a certain demand, we can find a style that is at times insecure, especially in the first stories, but only in style and language, not in form. I think the short story was a meritorious choice. The brevity of the anecdotes is enhanced and intensified by the precise form, barely hinted at or mentioned almost in passing. This is how the language is precisely the content, the action is limited to a few brief strokes, the environment is barely painted, and all this contributes so that the reader contributes the most of himself in the reading, and is surprised by the ending, generally resounding and successful, never exaggerated or with low blows. The ending of a short story, as Borges liked to say, must be surprising but natural at the same time. This is how these stories, whether about historical characters starring in invented anecdotes, or farmhands telling stories around a campfire, are able to. The story is often used to suggest a larger story based on certain clues, but these clues are not loose ends, but rather form well-consolidated knots, which join parts that the reader will link in his imagination. For this reason, and without anything else being necessary, these short stories fulfil their function adequately. The landscape is another protagonist, almost the main one, where these stories, implausible in other areas, take on the label of tangible reality. Even its protagonists, whom we barely get to see or meet, take on a mythical character because of this landscape created by the structure and narrative language. The stories grouped under the title of Christian Trilogy deserve special mention. Güiraldes' admiration for Flaubert is well known, and these stories are almost an imitation of the French author's *Three Tales*. That is why, after a foray into parody and irreverently religious humor in the first story, he enters the realm of self-sacrifice and the total self-abandonment of someone who was considered a criminal and a savage, to give himself to the other and thus achieve absolute redemption. Finally, Güiraldes takes the character of Saint Anthony just as Flaubert took Julian the Apostate, and just as Flaubert achieved one of his most terribly



beautiful stories, Gúiraldes obtains from his ascetic the maximum tone of self-flagellation for the expulsion of inner demons.

Two years later, he published *Raucha*, a kind of fictionalized chronicle of his own childhood. As in his book of poems, it stands out for its fragments, especially where the florid and postmodern images gain ground in his previously so brief and precise prose. The result, evaluated particularly in certain passages or sentences, is interesting, almost like examples of a technique in experimentation. And this is certainly the case, because the elements that make up the novel suggest it in this way: autobiography, poetic technique in a plain prose that seeks contrasts, a succession of vicissitudes and characters described as if in an almost theatrical enumeration, and above all the only line that runs through all of this: the story of a young man about his childhood, growth and learning. Nothing too deep, just a superficial journey through environments and a time, a sentimental document, we could say as a conclusion.

In *Rosaura* we find the definitive prose writer, this time in his romantic vein. But romantic in this case is not talking about pink stories and sugary characters, but about a European-style romanticism, adapted to the Argentine costumbrista canons. It is easy to see here the incipient style of Benito Lynch in the treatment of the environment as an expression of emotional states and as a determining factor in the creation of personalities. A town seen as an open prison, a land and a sky without limits but whose extension is as impossible to cross as an insurmountable barrier. A story of love and disappointment described in a delicate, endearing style, a language where the sentimental does not bother because it is tinged with dark and mysterious tones, those that the characters hide and the reader must guess. The apparent simplicity of the protagonists is compensated by the harsh and hard richness of the environment that surrounds them, landscape and characters seem to hit each other like members of a marriage only happy outside. The limitations of the protagonists, she with her chosen lyricism, he with his worldliness that protects him from all sentimental risk, are given by the environment in which they live, but they are also the ones who create those social conditions. A round trip that produces stories like this one, which will be repeated over and over again, like a dog that bites its tail. The skill of this long story is precisely in this symbiosis of soft and sentimental entertainment, beneath whose surface we find existential anguish, almost an allegory of the stubborn insistence of each man and woman in love, disappointment and pain. *Xamaica* was published in 1923, but written in 1919, when he was 33 years old. It is, until this year, his most accomplished work. From the structure and language it is extremely atypical for the time, at least in these regions, where the costumbrista and country novel predominated in a more conventional form, and urban literature suffered from the same evil, with a few honorable exceptions. *Xamaica* is a novel that has certain autobiographical connotations, but they are only secondary elements, instrumental we could call them, that serve

as background and tool for the creation of the novel. It is, in principle, a travel book, because it shares with this genre the form of a diary. It is, also, a personal diary, from the point of view that it relates the personal evolution and feelings towards one of the passengers. It is, also, a descriptive chronicle of places, done in a poetic way. But all this is assembled in a masterful way: the poetics of the language. He highlights the places visited, and these in turn are characters that adapt to the emotional vicissitudes of the protagonists. The poetics of the language, which, following the original postmodernist trend, has matured towards much more provocative but elegant, subtle and original images. For example, when he talks about the sea, in extremely beautiful paragraphs, or when he uses the following image: "on the edge of the small waves, which fall bending with the dead sound of wet rags." Another part of his style is the use of unconventional words, accepted but not in colloquial use, so they seem strange, but they constitute a determined form, a peculiarity, for example: "His arms seem to have lengthened from falling." These stylistic characteristics of the language, added to the dialogues far removed from all conventionalism, which sound constructed, even artificial, are in reality part of a conception of literature not as an instrument to show reality, but to filter it through the cultural criteria of each author. The similarity in this respect and in a certain indirect, elegant, sophisticated tone, which reminds us of Eduardo Mallea, is not a coincidence. Both authors share not only these stylistic characteristics of language, but also a nostalgic vision, certainly pessimistic and surrounded by a dream more intellectual than sentimental. It is, then, an exquisite novel, where the philosophy of existence is not pure rhetoric but symbiosis, a bridge between the soul and the surrounding reality; where language stops being an instrument to become that same vision, unique and plural at the same time, because through it the inner workings of the two main characters are revealed. For me, it is, without a doubt, one of the best novels written in Argentina in the 20th century.

#### Posthumously published texts

The Poems of Solitary and the Mystical Poems were written between 1922 and 1927. They date from a mature period of the author, where on a personal level he discovered a process of spiritualization close to Eastern teachings and was going through the period of his mortal illness. These poems are an excellent example of Ricardo's multiple talent for various genres. Already in his book of poems he had demonstrated an ability to approach poetry, always from a point of view of rupture in the structure, where the poetic was more about the form and the images than about the emotional content. In the poems that concern us now, the rupture persists, more attenuated, only to form a free verse structure, where the verses have almost the form of prose. They could be called poems in prose or poetic

prose, but this is not entirely the case. They are poems of long verses and free rhythm, with an internal music granted by the same audacity of the images. The first series tells us about the loneliness of man in the face of the landscape and among his fellow men, the second tells us about a spiritual strangeness that man feels with respect to himself and to God. They are conceptual poems, where the idea prevails, affirmed and guided by the images. Perhaps the most accurate example, which I take at random, is the following: "And a cessation of pain will precede the sickle of my step with a salutation of wheat in unison before the reaper."

The path is a notebook or diary that the author kept sporadically and made more frequent in the last year of his life. We can find here notes, ideas and comments from long before, rescued precisely in this last stage. Thus we see that there are ideas that are repeated, and an ideological congruence throughout the years with respect to the spirit of man and about the function of literature in general. These notes are imbued with a nostalgic, sad, sometimes distressing and disappointed tone, but the beauty of the language does not give rise to sickly pessimism, to prostrating attitudes, but to a curious kind of conformity and resignation in keeping with the inner peace he seemed to be experiencing as a result of his illness and the subsequent discovery of mystical ideas. The differences between Buddha and Christ are less important than the coincidences, he tells us. This absolutely personal position was the product of a search where dogmas were made to be broken, where arbitrary laws were made to be discarded, and only served as an instrument for the spiritualization of the individual, since man is alone before God, before, during and at the end of his life. God and the landscape surround a solitary man, a void as tenacious as the human body is weak. One more thing about this book. We have already made reference to certain similarities with Mallea. In this book this style is even more evident, the austerity in the statements, clear, forceful, far from all rhetoric or ideological adherences, using language as an instrument to create a hybrid genre that Mallea perfected.

The Bravo Book is a project that remained unfinished. The idea was apparently to develop a series of poetic essays about man and his relationship with social, political and cultural circumstances. A kind of catalogue about individual characteristics and their development in the interrelation with the times. The result, brief and partial, seems to point to a certain similarity, only in intentions and not in form, with Mallea's *Historia de una pasión argentina*. But what has been written is not relevant.

Pampa brings together the few poems he wrote for what was to be a new book of poems. Here he returns to a more descriptive tone, where the landscape takes on a leading role, but in this case it leads us into the

interior of man, and the idea of divinity is almost secondary or indirect. The idea of man's solitude is taken up again, but it is even cruder, more distressing: "...it is night under the stars and over the world."

The series of loose poems, written between 1917 and 1924, surprises us because they represent an intermediate advance between the audacity and immaturity of *El cencerro de cristal* and the philosophical maturity of *Poemas solitarios* and *Poemas místicos*. Except for two of them, the rest show a much more balanced development of language, between the audacity of symbolism and the new schools that would appear in the thirties and forties. These poems take the ever-renewed theme of the landscape as an expression of the soul without fear of crudeness and cynicism, less concerned with humor or irony than with poetic truth. Poems like *Cangrejal* and *Chimango* are the most terrible and outstanding of the group. Both also have their thematic twins in prose in *Don Segundo Sombra*, confirming that common view that linked different expressions through the thread of the same fundamental concern.

The stories and tales of early production are not relevant, they seem like mere attempts to approach characters and environments that he would later treat with a firm hand.

The *Studies and Commentaries* present us with the essayistic and critical Güiraldes. This facet of the author is as important as his work of fiction. The articles presented in the magazine "La Nota" introduce us to one of the themes that most influenced the author's culture. In response to or commentary on an article about Chaplin, and following a quote from Corbiere by the author of the article, Güiraldes highlights the parallelism between the filmmaker and the French writer, which serves to see two things: the readings that influenced Ricardo and also his moderation in the polemic, since in the second response, he closes the topic, considering useless an exchange that would not modify the opinions of both sides. The notes for the magazine "Proa", of which he was one of the directors, tell us about his stay in Paris and his knowledge of the literary groups of the time, his friendship with several of them, especially with Valery Larbaud. Here we discover a cosmopolitan literary side of Güiraldes, exchanging experiences and close relationships with authors as important as the symbolists. The note that tells of the reading of Romain Rolland is one of the most beautiful, as is his description of the gatherings in Adrienne Monnier's bookstore, where they met. The article on Saint John-Perse reveals Güiraldes the translator, as demanding as he is exquisite in his tastes. The article entitled *Grafomanía* tells us about his interest in the narrow boundary between fiction, reality and philosophy, giving the relevance and meaning of words a philological interest in keeping with his concern as a sculptor of prose and poetry. Another interesting point is his thoughts on criticism, not far from what a good writer usually thinks about it, that is, the partiality and arbitrariness of literary comments in supplements. To this, he contrasts his own comments on books, his point of

view being moderate and constructive, and especially lucid and profound. In these comments, he is not afraid to state his literary and political opinions, but the latter are removed from any partisan ideology, pointing out general aspects of nationality and thought, both inseparably linked to the formation of an identity. That is why he tells us, for example, about nationalism in literature or art in general: "In the intellectual republic, we should be free from such bloodthirsty children's games and not try to nationalize intelligence, art, genius, but by the control of the nationalism of the people. "These articles are intended to facilitate through translations the growth of the greatest of human privileges: talent." Then we read the comments on painting, which reveal another extremely important aspect of Güiraldes as an intellectual. Most of these notes relate his stay in Mallorca, where he met several Spanish and Argentine painters. These articles, lacking the corresponding pictorial illustration, are sprinkled with beautiful passages that elevate them from simple comments or anecdotes. The same can be said of the great majority of his articles and comments, which are not just mere notes, but each one is constructed with the concern and dedication of a literary work. That is why we find fragments of high poetry in prose that have the rare virtue of transmitting the author's impression on a certain subject and at the same time constructing a literary work that is worth its own worth. The other article where he comments on Honegger's work, *Le pacific*, is an even more finished example of those just commented. Here we read the sharp irony of his thoughts on progress in general, for example when he talks about Ford cars, and then makes a narrative description of the symphonic poem as if he were creating it instead of re-creating it. Hence the merit of these articles, where Ricardo did not only limit himself to stating opinions, but each of them constituted a vehicle for his art, that is, his prose tinged with a poetics that never ignored symbolism, but matured until acquiring its own style, constant and appropriate for each occasion.

In *Notes and Notes* we first find a series of phrases, aphorisms or short thoughts, which stand out for their conciseness, which Güiraldes made a law of his literature, and for their profound vision of both banal aspects, into which he immersed his provocative gaze, as well as other much deeper ones. The *Notes on the European War* are, on the other hand, much weaker. They suffer from a rhetoric that neither adds nor says anything about the war, suffering from a certain poetic paralysis that has left room for superficial expression. Güiraldes was not a political writer, and in the face of any superficial or rhetorical controversy he preferred to withdraw after expressing his sincere opinion. The *Notes on a Mallorcan Book* bring us back to the best Güiraldes, in a series of impressions and anecdotes about his stay in Mallorca. Here, as in his description of the Pampas, the landscape takes the foreground, being a symbiosis with the chosen language, so the result is a literary work that does not lack any supposed development to which it was destined as part of a larger unfinished work. The description of the old sailors and fishermen of Puerto Pollensa is among the best of his short non-fiction literature. But in Güiraldes, as we

have already said, fiction is linked to reality in a peculiar way, the chronicle takes on the character of a fiction because of the treatment used to transmit it, so that instead of losing emphasis, it is incorporated into the reader's imagination through this free method, and then it remains longer and produces more of an impression on the soul of the reader. The series of Notes on various topics are other linguistic and literary discoveries, where the poetic vision is linked to opinions on the reality of his time, and which nevertheless share a relevance, due to the same chosen treatment that we have already spoken of, with the reader's relevance.

The Epistolario does nothing more than affirm the impressions recorded above. Each letter is made in a literary way, although we must state, even though it is a truism, that at that time the epistolary genre was considered with that rank, at least in certain social and intellectual classes. Each and every one of them has its merit, and I would especially like to highlight the one where he announces his resignation from the direction of the magazine Proa to his colleagues Borges and Caraffa. The difficulties and complications, the resistance and disappointments in the production of the magazine seem to be exact reflections of what is happening today. Nothing has changed in the official and private attitude towards these undertakings. What at first seemed to promise great success, based on the voluntarism of a youth eager to express opinions and break down old taboos, is soon resisted by envy, political interests, etc. His final letters, despite being already affected by his illness, do not speak of it, although a certain melancholic air can be perceived that does nothing but exalt him as a person and intellectual. Finally, to finish this sketch that has no other purpose than to poorly highlight the personality of one of the most important writers of Argentina, I transcribe one of his final thoughts on his attitude towards literature: "I have a religious, metaphysical sense of poetry. I consider it our path and I believe that it is our path, ... "I don't look at the side of our heels" The story is something fleeting or easy to read. If microfiction achieves its goal, its basic objective of entertaining and moving, of transmitting and expressing a sensation, a feeling, a thought, in short, fulfilling what fiction literature is supposed to do, the words you have just read will hover around your head for a while after you have turned the page, before you go to the next, and they will even induce you, after finishing the book, to open it again and go over what you have read to corroborate, confirm or enjoy once again the pleasure or the shock of your reading. Vique's stories that we are now referring to fulfill this function fully. In my opinion, this collection confirms the author's talent for looking with a critical eye, with concise, tight, ironic, indirect means, at both the cruel and the tragic, the absurd and the simple that constitute the things of the world. I say things like I say men and women, because in the texts of this book, referring to the title and especially in the last part dedicated to the variations on Chang Tzu's dream, we talk about identity and its limits. Here we find a series of words and themes that, instead of fighting each other, for their apparently contrary connotations, play and exchange roles. We speak, for example, of the apparent contradictions between reality and

fiction, between absurdity and logic. In a word, they do not take each other or themselves seriously, and that is why the reader enters this game with the intention of having fun, and comes out moved, even confused, in the good and positive sense of the term, of course. Confusion as a breaking of prejudices or conventions. Humor as a breaking of solemnities. Irony as a means of tearing off hypocritical cloaks or covers. Of course, not all texts are always so dense; there are pages that have the function of alleviating, of relaxing the reader's effort to read the meaning between the lines, and this is also one of the characteristics implicit in a collection of microfictions. This book by Vique maintains the quality of the previous ones, I even dare to say that it surpasses them in certain characteristics: more conciseness with a greater density of meaning as a result of this, less humor but well dosed at the necessary moments, more irony, almost tragic irony, and a commendable black humor of the finest style. I find, above all and most importantly, greater depth of philosophical ideas, as if the author had begun to meditate conscientiously and had obtained a series not of aphorisms, but of meditations like oriental tales, characterized by their brevity and density of meaning. It is nothing more, I think, than the primary function of literature in its most original forms, chronologically speaking: legend, fable, and even earlier than them, brevity as a sufficient space through which to look at the vast expanse of the world hidden behind the deceptive surface of that world.

Peter Hartling

Waiblinger's Eyes (1987)

This novel by the Swabian author, who began as a journalist and only at the age of forty devoted himself fully to literature, publishing books of poems, essays and novels, begins as a very promising novel. At first, the language is extremely careful and of a high quality. The sentences are exact, they never fall into common places, and its style has the characteristic of not abounding in images, but in indirect actions. That is, the dialogues are transcribed literally, but without the traditional scripts, but as an implicit part of the text. This is part of the author's aim, since one of the thematic axes of the novel is the art-life dichotomy, which has concerned so many authors, including another close to Hartling's cultural and spatial sphere: Thomas Mann. Here, the protagonist is a poet who intends to enter, at the behest of his father, the Stift, an institute of theology and philosophy where great authors such as Holderlin and Schelling studied. But the chosen point of view, brief, narrow, ambiguous, seems to narrate the life of the young protagonist as he writes it, or vice versa, when he lives life it is written. His imagination about the immediate events coincides with reality, or perhaps

they are memories that he relives as premonitions a posteriori. Reality and fiction, then, are mutually constructed and reconstructed. The language is timeless, and this is another merit of the novel. The only indication of the period comes to us when Holderlin is mentioned as an acquaintance and contemporary of the protagonist, whom he visits in his confinement. We know then that we are in the first half of the 1800s, but the exact date is not given to us until halfway through the novel. This type of style is a discovery, austere, almost autistic, we could say, where everything happens from the point of view of the protagonist, and therefore the external actions

Fabián Vique

La vida misma y otras minificiones (2006)

The short or hyper-short story, the so-called micro-fiction that does not occupy more than one page at most, has more requirements to meet, more limitations and rules that restrict it, than perhaps any other genre or format of fiction. But as in all art, the challenge is an incentive, a driver for the good work of the creator. For some authors, this genre or format does not seem to hide secrets. The delicate balance between surprise, absurdity, reality, fiction, humor, must be seen in its proper proportion according to each story to be told. Fabián Vique is one of these craftsmen who knows how to build, make and nuance his stories. From the same stories told, original, profound, terrible in many cases, we go through a series of nuances that occur in each paragraph, sometimes in two different sentences. The variety of resources is great: the point of view that changes, the story that begins as one and ends up reflecting another, a parallel story towards which the camera's eye is suddenly directed, the humor, appropriately proportioned, placed directly in the shorter texts above all, as if to alleviate the atmosphere and the tension that the rest provoke. Sometimes, this humor allows itself certain timid steps, as if poking its head out, in strong stories, granting a clear tone and a fresh air that does nothing but accentuate the contrast and offer relief to the main thing in each story. But one of the great merits of these texts is the development of the characters. They are barely sketched, but their description is so accurate that it is very easy to imagine them, even when they are extravagant characters or the absurd is the main point of their existence. For this very reason, the verisimilitude, so difficult in a short text, here is rooted in well-defined characters through precise language; that is why I said before that these fictions are wisely constructed. Sometimes, one tends to be disillusioned by short texts because they give too much importance to the trivial anecdote or the funny episode. The absurd,



however, sometimes saves the situation, but by itself it can do little if there is no deeper, more transcendent background. To make literature, I think, you have to have something interesting to say. These stories by Vique demonstrate and confirm that in a very small space one can talk about things as important as death or evil, about God and life beyond death, about love and its multiple facets, complexities and contradictions. There are magnificent, moving texts, such as *Las Muertes diarias*, others where humor hides disturbing disorders, such as *El escupidor* by Rafael Castillo or *El cerdo*, or also when one talks about time and God, as in *Dios y Siod*, *Diez minutos*, *El fin de los suicidas ferrocarrilos*. There are stories where strange characters prevail, and their very mystery elevates the story to raw and intense levels, such as *Nicanor's Baby* or *Tormented*. The quality of the stories told recalls the great themes of Kafka, Buzzati or Schulz, although the style is very particular, not entirely localist but with a warm familiarity, almost carefree and casual, but this itself is a carefully prepared construction. What sounds casual and simple can transmit more concern than what is artificial. It is, then, one more requirement for the success of a short piece, if we intend for this type of text to surpass the narrow limits of the joke or the anecdotal to move on to the levels to which authors such as Hesse, Borges or those mentioned above have taken them. Vique contributes, in this case, texts that without a doubt enrich the genre and literature in general. They are part of something that he seems to be reading and not seeing, or at the same time that he is writing it. The flaws of this novel arise when all these positive elements do not become elements of use but simple loose and wasted factors. The protagonist experiences a love affair with a young woman of Jewish origin, a relationship that is resisted by her family. The point is that we do not know if this resistance is due to the prevailing social factors, the protagonist's background (it is said that he has been unsuccessfully in love with another young woman and once tried to commit suicide), or to incest factors that are hinted at in the woman's family. These ambiguities, instead of fulfilling a mysterious function, a factor that provides certain clues but not directly stated, confuse due to their vagueness and weakness. Holderlin's character and his indirect relationship with the protagonist, that is, the life-art relationship, is not developed, and is only given as an unfinished clue, as a path that promises much and is suddenly interrupted. The structure of the novel is divided into chapters that alternate between the point of view of the main character and that of an adopted girl who lives with Waiblinger's fiancée. This girl is secretly in love with him, and she also plays the role of a witness character, but ultimately her real function is not clear, she does not follow an evolution, the purpose of using this character is not understood because ultimately she has no consequences either in the life of the protagonist or in the emotional structure of the plot. If her function were to reveal the contrast between reality and the interiority of the protagonist, it is not fulfilled, because the point of view of the girl is written as another interiority, and there is also no evolution that indicates another possible path or function. I am not talking about the evolution of the

character as a person, but as an instrument within the plan of the novel, as a cog in the machinery that advances the intellectual and emotional plot, that is, the transformations of the conflicts within this novelistic world. In short, it is a novel with a promising and ambitious objective, but it fails terribly in its resolution, remaining, as a paradox, on the surface of its own ambitions, without going deeper or developing. I think that this novel would have gained a lot from a longer length to delve into the development of the characters and the conflicts, as interesting as in this case the corridors that every writer must travel to give coherence to two forces that are only apparently contrasting, literature and life.

Francis Bret Harte

### Californian Sketches

A compilation of stories by the North American writer, which includes early texts up to the last of his production, is an anthology, if not sufficient, at least worthy and satisfactory of his art. These stories by Bret Harte have, in principle, an exclusive setting: California in the first half of the 19th century. Then, being more specific, we will say that within this North American state, the stories are located in an area limited by the towns that emerged as mining camps. The author places his fiction in this area, and to do so he uses both fiction and reality. For those who do not know that area and that time, the towns mentioned, unless they still exist, do not say anything special, they could be invented as well as true. Hence the first ambiguity, which is not such but rather a factor in favor of the plausibility of the stories told. Bret Harte narrates like a chronicler, he has that language or style that apparently is that of someone who writes recounting anecdotes of an era. He uses, although not literally but with a subtlety worthy of the best narrative style, the maybes, the it is said, the conditional verbal tenses and the flashbacks that are barely hinted at and do not bother, but rather imperceptibly add clues to the understanding of the story. And stories are not always complex. Some plots are simple, but the language is simple and measured, simple but worked, with the best technique that journalism can provide, that is, the recounting of facts and the slight insinuation, disassembles the plots to barely glimpse them and puts them back together. Then the reader has already seen enough to understand what is hidden in the darkness of the characters. When the plot is simple, the language satisfactorily fulfills the function of attracting the reader's attention. Here we must say that the poetry of language is the main means by which the characters are not described in a conventional way, but by their fusion with the landscape, and the setting is the main protagonist of these stories. Nor does the visual description overwhelm in

this sense, but rather creates a stylistic-emotional climate. The place is the verb, that is, the subject and the action at the same time. We could compare it with Mark Twain in his theme. , but in Bret Harte irony is not the main thing, and humor is measured and only an instrument of relief in the plot of these stories. His gaze has a great tenderness towards the characters, who are usually poor or unsuccessful. His card players cheat, but they are also capable of self-denial and sublime behavior when faced with certain circumstances. His women are also survivors, some treacherous, but simply survivors in a man's world. The characters, therefore, are not rich in their description but in their behavior, and above all in their relationship with the environment. It is curious how the richest characters are those who adapt to the wild and violent environment in which they live, and those who come or move to the east, that is, to a more civilized life, seem lost, weak or somewhat morally effete. The Commander's Right Eye is a story that includes an ambiguity of almost fantastic reminiscences. The Luck of Roaring Camp is one of his best stories, where an entire camp raises the son of a prostitute as a kind of treasure of their own. The Outlaws of Poker Flat shows the self-denial and sacrifice that the supposed scum of society are capable of in extreme circumstances. The Tennessee Partner is another example of the previous case, and includes one of the most emotional endings of these stories. Brown of Calaveras, Miggles and How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar are other examples of this self-denial and spirit of sacrifice of the characters. Bret Harte's men and women are capable of killing without hesitation, but just as they make these drastic decisions every day, for that very reason, perhaps, they are capable of sacrificing themselves for the good of another person. What unites these stories, in addition to the place and the characteristics of its inhabitants, are the characters who reappear on the scene in different stories, the gamblers Jack Hamlin and John Oakhurst, for example, or Yuba Bill, the stagecoach driver, which creates another link to create the verisimilitude in this world whose chronicle Bret Harte tells us. A world that seems real but has the flavor of something well imagined and told; that has, at the same time, the certainty of a time gone by and the insinuating fantasy of something never lived but retold again and again. It is not by chance, then, that Jorge Luis Borges wrote the prologue to this anthology. The chronicle of violent times and the characters of a contradictory nature were in keeping with his fascination with a remote and imagined Buenos Aires, populated by thugs with stony faces but the spirit of a frightened child.

Bertrand Russell

Unpopular Essays (1950)

My first contact with Russell was many years ago. I was in my early thirties when I read *The Dictionary of Modern Man*. At that time I really liked this initial approach to a more serious philosophy than the one I had experienced in high school. Its clear but not overly simplistic definitions and explanations, its broad knowledge of all branches of culture, were an important discovery for me. Then, I had to read more of Russell. Fiction always gained ground on philosophy, so it was not until much later that I read *Unpopular Essays*. A few years and some experience and learning passed, and perhaps also a certain criterion that allowed me to see flaws where I had not seen them before, or if I sensed them, they were not clear. I started this book expecting to enjoy it as much as the previous one. The first chapter talks about philosophy and its relationship with politics. It also tells us that science represents liberalism, since it is based on doubt and permanent experimentation. The second chapter tells us that philosophy has the capacity to set guidelines and limits to the discoveries of science. The third chapter or essay tells us about the political situation of that time, about the danger of communism and the threat of a third world war. He proposes three possible hypotheses for the future of humanity before the end of the century. This is where the mistakes begin. It is obvious that it is difficult for any thinker who is immersed in the conflicts of his time to be sufficiently impartial. His hypotheses sound somewhat childish compared to what happened later. He speaks to us, for example, of a complete destruction of humanity, or of the creation of a common world government. The reality that followed, if not completely removed from his ideas, was much more complex. His commentary on the danger of communism is in keeping with the paranoia of the time, if not also the result of a tendency that his somewhat superficial language does not tend to deny. He speaks of the difference between the Soviet Union and the United States in terms of freedom, but does not take into account the appearance of McCarthyism and the cultural imperialism of the following decades.

#### Variations on Chuang Tzu's Dream (2009)

Vique has accustomed us to his short texts, where the right doses of irony, absurdity, humor and intellectual depth are combined in a wise balance. Microfictions are as difficult or more difficult to read than a long text, not because of their reading time or structural density or complexity of language, but because of what they involve in what they do not say. This not saying is the main key, in my opinion, in all fiction literature, and above all in short texts, as it also happens, and especially, in poetry. If we stick to short narrative, microfiction should not be confused with a superficial anecdote, or something more similar to a joke at dinner (let us clarify, with all due respect to good jokes, that there are undoubtedly great differences in quality in this genre). On the one hand, the author must not confuse brevity with ease, so his work must be more thought out, more meditated,

to achieve the extreme synthesis necessary for the effectiveness of his text. On the other hand, the reader must not confuse the apparent simplicity of The other problem is that it also justifies the use of force when, for example, a country is threatened by a dangerous idea or force, which contradicts the ideas presented in the previous chapters, where he speaks of philosophy and liberalism as the force capable of avoiding all conflict and violence. Russell was a great thinker, immersed in the conflicts of his time and very capable of adapting to the needs and circumstances. Therefore, rather than a profound philosopher, he was a kind of politician of the disciplines of thought. He traveled from mathematics to science, from sociology to politics, from philosophy to literature. Rereading his Dictionary of Contemporary Man now, I notice a similarity of impressions. His style makes him a kind of general popularizer, an intermediary between the complexity of the intellectual disciplines and the common people. I do not mean to say that in other books we do not find a deeper Russell, because I do not know them, or that his intimate thought is not much more interesting than what is published. His popularity may have come from there, being an intellectual for the masses, someone who brought out the general ideas of science and philosophy with a certain irony and intelligent humor. Something accessible to the common man who had no access or capacity for deep understanding or constructive discussion of serious human problems. There are also some of his theories that have fallen into a certain absurdity, such as the one about the possible world government and the common police. His opinions about other authors and thinkers, which for someone who has not read them may seem intelligent only because Russell expresses them with overwhelming knowledge and sharp irony, are arbitrary when one reads those authors with a personal, critical and mature criterion. In short, his ideas are somewhat simplistic, at least in view of what has been read, general and partial. His style is somewhat arrogant and he does not conceal a personal attitude that is not very willing to accept the arbitrariness of his opinions, and that is why his figure is that of someone more committed to himself and his own criteria than that of a thinker concerned with the ancestral anguish of man and his search for the origin through knowledge.

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

The Twelve Exemplary Novels (1613)

It is generally acknowledged that Cervantes founded the modern novel with Don Quixote of La Mancha, by establishing the structure and the plot around the same main character. While ancient novels or epic poems were a succession of adventures with little chronological relationship or

plausibility in their direct relationship with one another, Don Quixote, also constituting a series of successive anecdotes, has in common not only a certain character, but a cause and effect relationship that modifies the preceding scenes, and therefore, as they are no longer merely episodes but scenes, a plot scheme is formed that includes a development. This development is what will be called from now on story or plot, in which both plot and psychological factors are involved. At that time these terms were not used, of course, but the idea of the development and growth of the characters is implicit, with previous extrapolations that we allow ourselves. At that time, one of the key problems of the novel arises as a consequence: what is more important, the plot or the exploration of the characters? Later, another even more controversial issue would arise, especially for the twentieth century: the dichotomy of story or plot and language. All this comes as a preamble to talk about the *Novelas ejemplares*, twelve long stories that Cervantes published at the age of 66, already with the fame of Don Quixote under his belt. These long stories could also be called *nouvelles*, but in my opinion they have the modern structure of a story, and are of an excellence that transcends the four centuries of their existence. First of all, we immediately recognize a style of language that we have already seen in Don Quixote. It is a style that is difficult to define or classify. It has the Spanish idioms of the time, its characteristic tone and accents, a tremendously abundant and extremely light verbose fluency. It is simple at the same time that it does not fall into easy solutions or concessions to bad taste. But above all, it is perhaps the music of his narrative, a poetics involved in the same way of speaking as of writing, included in the grammatical form and the turns of phrase that are proper to each person, in this case, to each author. All this constitutes a rhythm that never declines or saturates due to excess of baroque. This language is implicitly confused with the themes that he deals with, or rather with another of the stylistic resources that constitute a second plane between language and theme, that is, irony and humor, sarcasm and tenderness. These are the ingredients of Cervantes' point of view. He is a realist writer, without a doubt, dedicated to depicting the life of ordinary people. His characters are the poor, the abandoned, the thieves, the gypsies. But this reality, instead of being seen exclusively in its dark or negative factors, is enhanced by a sarcastic and humorous vision, whose objective is not to attenuate the drama, but on the contrary, to expose it to ourselves, so that we laugh, and therefore think and then cry, about our own miseries. The other aspect is that of the theme. Here, the arguments are in some cases attached to the usual themes for the novels of that time. The maidens kidnapped as children who are raised as the daughters of others, until some gentleman sees fit to discover the cover-up and reveal the truth, after paying for it with the maiden's hand. In this case we can include *La gitanilla*, *La española inglesa* and *La ilustre fregona*. Another theme related to the previous one is the dishonour of the adolescent or young maiden, as in *The Two Maids* and *The Force of Blood*, but even a strong theme like rape is diluted within a stylistic treatment in accordance with the canons of

the time, extolling the bravery and common sense of the woman and the good judgment of the repentant man. These concessions, however, although they weaken the narrative force, especially in the last mentioned story, are saved by the skill and subtle irony of the author. The theme of the picaresque is in the thieving or "smart" characters that we see in *Rinconete y Cortadillo* and *La señora Cornelia*. The jealous man from *Extremadura* is one of the best in the series, which would fall into the previous classification, but which stands out for the masterful development of the main character, the jealous old man who locks up his young wife. And here the psychological characteristics are not so influential, but the mere acts and descriptions of the atmosphere of the closed house, which constitute by themselves one of the best written in the Spanish language. This story is a perfect example of the total symbiosis between plot, style, setting and characters. The lawyer *Vidriera* could also be classified as picaresque, but this character is not someone who wants to take advantage of others for his own benefit, but rather acts out of temporary madness. His definitions and arguments about reality are of an unsurpassed sharpness, which shares both harsh irony and naive humor. These annotations and reflections on the world and man, which here stand out as constituting the main theme of the story, are dispersed in all the others, and it is worth mentioning *The Gypsy Girl* (see the monologue about the life of gypsies) and *Rinconete and Cortadillo* (about the life of thieves). *The Deceitful Marriage* is another of the high points due to the rupture of the conventional form of the novel. From an episode starring picaresque characters, we enter a conversation that bears its own name as a novel within this novel or short story. Cervantes has already accustomed us to these references to reality and fiction intermingled in his *Quixote*. This text is not a saga, since its length differentiates it both in objectives and achievements. Two dogs, *Cipión* and *Berganza*, hospital (or hospice) dogs, discover that they can speak, and without being able to stop, they talk about their lives, about the owners they have had, and their semi-philosophical reflections are an excuse to talk about man and the world. This story contains one of the most accomplished and most beautiful fragments, when *Berganza* relates what a witch has told him about his ancestors. This episode stands out both for its narrative beauty and for the thematic force that it implies and underlies. The mystery of evil and magic is barely hinted at in a text whose irony and tenderness alternate so masterfully that they merge to leave this bittersweet and pleasant aftertaste at the same time in the reader's mouth. The last story, *The Fake Aunt*, stands out for the naked crudeness of its theme, a young woman is prostituted by a woman who picked her up from the street. As in the rest of the stories, the ending is happy, and love is the element that rescues the lost young women, but it is a text that also concentrates in fewer pages and greater density everything we have been saying, irony and a certain tragic humor as a means of making cruel reality tolerable.

## SEX LOOKS LIKE WAR

"We are so overwhelmed with quantities of books, that we hardly realise any more than a book can be valuable like a jewel, or a lovely picture, into which you can look deeper and deeper every time."

David Herbert Lawrence

D. H. Lawrence

Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928)

Novel written at the age of 34, It shows an expressive maturity and a unique lucidity, as well as, of course, an audacity that is not a mere narrative effect but is born naturally and necessarily from the theme. And the word, natural or naturalism, emerges implicitly in the conception of this novel. Natural not only because of the careful description of nature, almost bucolic, that we see in some of Lawrence's stories, but also because of the poetic and complementary function it has in relation to the rigid personalities of the characters, and extrapolation or inverted projection of what they have voluntarily decided to hide, but also because of the objective of transmitting a determined reality in the most faithful way possible. Reading this novel, the association with Zola is not arbitrary, but almost direct. The similarities are not exhausted in the almost scientific objective of studying the physiology of a society, its behavior, its repressions, hypocrisies and weaknesses, even its coldness and cruelty towards others and towards itself. The similarity increases if we think of the descriptive and narrative audacity, the lack of prejudices and the breaking of taboos regarding certain themes that until then were regions explored only by marginal literature, pornographic if that is what it could be called at the time. Lawrence decides to expose the actions and thoughts, the everyday words that we all think but are forced to repress out of consideration for others according to the education we have received. Profane words, obscene gestures, a whole natural expansion of expressions that arise spontaneously from the happiness and pleasure that two young and healthy people can feel in the sexual act, before and after. The innate desire for previous sensations and the games free of all double meanings, and therefore of all evil, after sex. And this audacity is not merely a search for effect, but an expansion, a psychic liberation from a whole system of repressions and upset values. Clifford Chatterley is disabled as a result of



the war, and will not be able to have children. This end of the love triangle is the one that first emerges as a pathetic character whom we must understand and pity. However, anger at his condition and a grasped scale of values and prejudices determine that he behaves in a selfish and cruel way towards his wife and his people. We then stop feeling pity for him, and pity for the weak turns into contempt for base instincts. Lady Chatterley gradually sheds her class prejudices and lets herself be overcome first by sexual desire, then by the superiority of a body and a mind stripped of all prejudice and condescension. These are the body and mind of the gamekeeper, a disenchanted individual, cynical about life in general and women in particular. Disenchanted with life, he only knows that the "tickling that is born between his legs" is something that will once again chain him to a desire and a relationship that he will regret but cannot avoid. The discourses between the lovers are full of cynicism and a sad and pathetic exploration of interpersonal relationships and the human condition in general. The acidic humor and the veiled irony are carried placidly and subtly above the vertigo of sex that even today, almost ninety years later, subjects the reader to a supreme revelation of his own sex and his own sexual experiences. There is no pornography, nor can we even speak of explicit eroticism. The words penis and cunt (using the vernacular terms of the translation) are mentioned in a natural and defiant manner at the same time. It is not unimportant to say that if the openly explicit expressions of the forester are striking for their brazenness and lucidity, a necessary mixture of an aristocratic education and a peasant simplicity, Constance's way of behaving tries to show what women feel beyond the mask that they must expose to society, that is, a decent and well-groomed behavior. Lawrence has taken care to translate as faithfully as possible the innate pleasure in female sexual functions, not through coarse genitalia, but through the sensations and delicate, though scabrous, games of sex. The forest is another protagonist of the novel, it represents the place of isolation where a man and a woman can be themselves without being exposed to the opinion of others. An interior forest, we could say. The city or town of Wragby represents the opposite, duty and what should be, the masks of power and money, the good society conscientiously maintained with cruel maneuvers approved by a class struggle that only contemplates the survival of the fittest. And this is the great contrast that represents, perhaps, the most important theme of the novel, beyond sex and human desires. The fall of a society corrupted by its own repressions, by the desires of others ... and love twisted and turned into monsters by his own hand. Clifford resorts to everything to avoid the closure of the mines that have supported his family for centuries, in the face of a slow but steady advance of social changes and the growth of union and worker power. Clifford first hides behind his work as a writer, a perhaps more valid way of channeling the anger of his circumstances, even though his work lacks spirit, then behind an arduous work of recomposing his business. But even though this effort is successful, he loses his wife definitively, and he will not even be able to maintain the usual facade because she has revealed

herself both physically and spiritually. Lady Chatterley, despite her own limitations and prejudices, knows that if she does not obey her inner desires it will be nothing worthwhile, and she does not even consider it in this conscious way. Sexual desire has cooled to take the firm forms of a conception more in accordance with happiness, or perhaps with her inner way of conceiving it. She is pregnant by the gamekeeper, and the child is the future that her lover is afraid of. At one point he tells her: "I am afraid to bring children into the world," and she answers: "Be gentle with him and that will be his future."

The above-mentioned similarity with Zola tells us of a direct relationship in the same school of naturalism, now free of its excessive details and perfected according to contemporary times. If in Zola there was a hard and dirty beauty of the everyday and the ugly, in Lawrence the style gains in descriptive poetry and internal and external beauty. The subtle extrapolations of psychology are firmer but less crudely exposed. Another interesting association is with *Madame Bovary*. Like Emma, Constance is driven to seek affection and satisfaction in a lover, but the case is curiously reversed both in the path and the causes between the two. Emma is a peasant who aspires to good society, Constance is of society and opts for the marginal life. One suffers frustrations and deceptions from her lover, the other finds fidelity and sentimental depth. Emma has a tragic end, society defeats her and she decides to flee in death, Constance faces society because she knows she is no longer alone, and although she cannot defeat it, she will flee not towards death but towards an isolated life but of greater sincerity with herself. Although the end of *Lady Chatterley* could be described as happy, the impression of the novel is one of cruel irony and a bitter vision of the world it portrays. Delving deeper into the human condition, there are tremendous and lucid arguments about the characteristics of men and women, about taboos and hypocrisies, about feelings and behaviors.

It is a sociological and at the same time philosophical study, and for this it uses both psychology and a sharp and strict observation of human society, all these observations filtered through a cynical mind that does not exclude pity and the need to understand its object of study. Lawrence, as we have already said in relation to his stories, is part of what he criticises, but he manages to distance himself in order to write openly about what he observes, but not far enough away for his gaze to be cold. Cynicism is a weapon that was once a bone surrounded by flesh, now stripped of its soft parts and edges, which have become sharp edges that cut with a very gentle pain, but which he explores with the compassion of a scientist who remembers a poem while making his meticulous dissection.

*The Prussian Officer and Other Stories* (1914)

When David Herbert Lawrence published these stories he was 29 years old, and both in his writing and in his view of society and its characters, the author demonstrates surprising maturity and sharpness. The English literary heritage is clear in terms of dramatic restraint and the absolute absence of all gratuitous sentimentality. What stands out in these stories is first of all their almost perfect construction, not only because of the final achievement and its impact on the reader, but because step by step one can see a skill and a mastery of what one wants to tell, having, of course, the talent and the necessary intellectual tools. These elements, as for any literary work that claims to be called good, are the discreet and accurate gaze of a man who is part of and at the same time a witness to what he tells or intends to criticize, an innate talent for narrating in the most careful way possible, and an exquisite sensitivity that distinguishes very well between the bittersweet of life and the merely vulgar or melodramatic. The richness of these stories is distinguished, then, on the one hand, by the poetic nature of the descriptive, which does not simply occupy a very important and extensive part of these stories as a mere ornament. This poetic richness of the descriptive, whether it is a landscape, a season of the year or a story, is a very important and extensive part of the story. The changes in the character's nature and physical appearance compensate and complete the extreme rigor of the protagonists. They seem to be permanently divided between two opposing forces: what they want to be and what they are or should be. There is a latent anguish that is sometimes confused with contained anger, sometimes with sadness, sometimes with sarcasm. The story that gives the book its title is a typical example. A Prussian officer is the victim of his own contradictory and repressed feelings, homosexual for sure although they are never mentioned, which leads him to subject his subordinate to humiliation and violence. And the subordinate is also the victim of conflicting feelings that cannot be expressed: love, pain, humiliation. The barriers that the man has formed around himself, barriers of education that seem as weak as a glass fence, are harder than a cement wall or even stone. And it is there where desires and instincts collide and show their strength even greater than this stone, and if not, they turn against their own owner, destroying him in many different ways. We can find the same in other masterful tales, such as *The Vicar's Daughters*, where they represent two contrasting and archetypal ways of conceiving life. One voluntarily submitting to her husband, both in body and soul, the other seeking against all odds passion and true love. This tale, curiously, masterfully, is also a tale about freedom. The freedom of women to choose for themselves even voluntary slavery, the freedom of miners who fight against a society of masters and bosses that establishes their way of life, the freedom of society distinguished both to dominate others and to destroy itself with its own repression. The impotence of feelings between couples is another important theme, especially in *The White Stocking*, where a mature couple finds themselves the victim of a subtle and discreet love triangle, which nevertheless undermines the foundations of the love that had kept them together until then. In *The*

Christening, one of the daughters of an old miner has a illegitimate son, and here we have a clearer example of the social differences and the barriers of education and economic interests that produce them. Lawrence's characters can be aristocrats, middle class or simple miners plagued by poverty and economic subjugation, but in all of them he knows how to find the key to their emotional conflict. The social causes at first sight are what is relevant, but the language and music of the prose introduce us, they soak us in the personality of the protagonists. Despite the distance in time and space, these characters are extremely everyday and understandable, described with a delicacy and sensitivity that does not take away from the sharpness and the sharpness when it should be. For example, the way in which Mary, the vicar's eldest daughter, gives herself as an offering to her husband, a man already repressed, selfish and close to cruelty, is pathetic. What makes her choose him: to save the economic situation of her parents, who are themselves cold and self-interested, or is there a true conviction of her husband's intellectual and spiritual superiority? There are fragments that perfectly summarise the whole philosophy of these characters: as when someone says: "And loneliness was a void worse than hunger", or when the protagonist of *The White Stocking* says: "She didn't think about her husband. He was the permanent base from which she could make small, flightless flights into nothingness." Finally, the last story, *The Smell of Chrysanthemums*, is worth mentioning. This is perhaps the most moving story in the book, without ceasing to retain the harshness of the others. Here we have the wife of a miner with two children, who awaits her husband's return from work. The hours pass and he does not return. She reproaches herself for having married this man who goes to the tavern to drink instead of returning home. Later, his companions bring him back dead; there has been an accident in the mine. The man is laid to rest in the house, and his body is prepared by his wife and his mother. And while she cleans her husband's body, she thinks of the stranger she married, of the man she once loved and who is now simply a lifeless body, incapable of all feeling and warmth. And there is fear, the fear of life, innate, cruel, but in the face of the death she now sees, she turns away. They are no longer one, and although even in life they had ceased to be one, she must turn away from death, "her last master," in fear and shame.

Heinrich Mann

Professor Unrat (1905)

Better known in Spanish as *The Blue Angel*, the name of the film based on this novel, it should not lose its original title, since more than the café-

concert where the two protagonists meet, the allegorical The name of the professor and the connotations of his personality are the true protagonists of the novel. Professor Raat is one of those literary characters that it is extremely difficult to characterize him visually through the interpretation of an actor. The actor can give him details of gestures, clothes and tone of voice, but they will always be one among many other possibilities. Literature has the merit of specifying and yet leaving to chance - or to the imagination of the reader, which is, ambiguously, the same and the different - the physical and then moral physiognomy of the protagonist. In short, Professor Raat is a 57-year-old man, widowed, resentful and spiteful. He is mocked by his students, seeing his surname transformed by them into Unrat, which in German means "garbage." For a long time, the life of the professor has been dedicated, more than to teaching, to catching those who mock him. And as he rarely can, he finds clever ways to get revenge: by giving them difficult or simply impossible homework and tasks, by taking revenge on the families whose members were also his students and for whom he has made it impossible for them to have a profitable career over the years. Why does Unrat behave this way? Who started all this? We are not given any precise clues. Everything seems to be a vicious circle: the teacher with his excessively rigid and tyrannical personality, selfish and unfair, and the students who feed his resentment with their mockery, which from being innocent has become signs of tremendous hatred. Thus, one side successively provokes the other without a break. The change occurs when Raat finds in the notebook of his most hated student, the one who has never called him by his nickname, and who he believes to be the most dangerous for that reason, some verses dedicated to a café-concert or cabaret artist from this Germany of the beginning of the twentieth century. He goes in search of her with the aim of warning her to stay away from her students, but when he finds her, he is seduced by her. Thus a new struggle begins between the students and him, this time to maintain the artist's love and favors. She finds in him a new opportunity to be supported, since he also has a natural daughter, and finally they marry. The whole town thinks badly of them, Raat loses his position at the school, but nevertheless the couple's house begins to be visited and known as a place where one can play and drink freely, where all desires of play and love can be fulfilled. In this way, Raat, apparently extremely moralistic, moves to the opposite side of the moral spectrum, but never stops being the old tyrant that he has always been.

Here we see a series of parallel and subordinate relationships between all these characters. On the one hand, the relationship between the artist Rosa and Unrat suggests something similar to what happens between Lolita, the protagonist of Nabokov's novel, and her mother's husband, also a teacher. Not only because of the age difference, but because of the relationship of almost subordination between him and her, implying in turn a desire for possession: what I love dominates me but will always be mine and no one else's. Rosa knows how to manipulate her teacher with feminine cunning to achieve what she wants: certain comforts and a good life. At the same time,

this relationship of power is seen more clearly between Raat and his students: if at school they were subordinate to his power, outside of school they are also subjected thanks to the help that Rosa offers her husband against them. All this is not manifested literarily as plans for revenge or clear conspiracies, but as part of the characters' own personalities. They conceive life in this way: crudely and plainly. As a survival in which revenge is only the consequence of rancor and resentment, and bitterness and frustration are the driving force behind them. This relates Unrat to another character from Heinrich Mann's novel *The Subject*, where the relationships and consequences of power are also shown not through arguments but through behaviour and personalities. It is in the body and soul of the protagonists where the atrocities of resentment are transformed into actions of power and hatred towards others. And these characters do not need to be high officials, but simple men who can subject others to their power and will. Another example that comes to mind, although from another author, Par Lagerkvist, is the terrible and masterfully evil jester from *The Dwarf*, or being a little more demanding still, Shakespeare's Richard III. Because we have forgotten to say that these frustrations have their equivalent with certain physical defects or bodily characteristics that determine and personify a certain deformity of the soul. In Richard's case, his hunchback, in Unrat's case, his ugliness and lack of hygiene. Despite these apparent stereotypes, ambiguity always predominates. and the productive contradiction in the hands of a good narrator. In Unrat we find desires for revenge, but also a special form of love for the artist; in turn he is seen with compassion by some, for example his student Lohmann, and also with hatred and mockery by most of the others. "The Blue Angel" is, then, a meeting place, a small literary world where characters meet, and therefore ideas and feelings, in short, it is the place where individual conflicts collide.

The style of the narration is what determines the main individual characteristics of this novel. Without this hard, concise style, with an absolute lack of poetics that tends to alleviate the harsh reality of these characters, the novel would be boring and unoriginal. The severe and precise, exact style shows the power that is born of anger and resentment. There is no place here for compassion or love, which when they seem to present themselves, are mere simulations to achieve other ends. The characters would be almost ridiculous if it were not for their tragic pathos, dominated by sickly passions where natural characteristics merge with social conditioning. All this occurs without explanations, only with behaviors. Almost an allegory of the power of the moment, of governmental power and of human power in general, this novel offers us an extremely harsh and nonconformist vision of the world through an anecdote told almost in passing, without exaggeration, and that is why it is so compelling. Only at the end does the author allow himself a certain condescension with the justice of man, showing us Unrat humiliated and defeated by his own machinations, as a victim of his own hatred.

Claude Levi-Strauss

Tristes Tropiques (1955)

Tristes Tropiques is a work by the ethnographer and anthropologist Levi-Strauss who, as happens with the most outstanding scientists or thinkers, in addition to the invaluable distinction and originality of his thought, is also a great writer. If one approaches, as is my case, these disciplines apparently far from literature, it is because there is a "way", a "form", a style that is responsible for telling, for building the edifice of a theory, for assembling hypotheses and anecdotes, reflections and certainties, impressions and descriptions. With all this, the author must convince the reader who is not necessarily interested in the subject matter. Ethnography, the science that tells us about the study of races and their geographical distribution, among other objects, can be monotonous, cold, boring for the reader accustomed to fiction. Here there is no fictitious or invented material, everything is absolutely real, at least from the point of view of the author, a subject from the outset with a certain objectivity, but whose study material necessarily passes through the filter of his thought, soaked, molded by years of study and a way of thinking determined by the culture from which he comes. This is the subject he will deal with at the end of the book, the inevitable contradiction of the ethnographer: critical of his own culture and complacent with the cultures of others. Other cultures will seem to him to a greater or lesser extent complex, degrading or even superior to his own, but there will always be a judicious, logical criterion that implies the understanding of this or that way of life. In turn, this understanding will come from the critical capacity he has acquired by analyzing his own culture, and yet he must impose a moral detachment when studying others, something he cannot do when studying his own. Therefore, Levi-Strauss knows that he must accept the complementary mutilation of his vocation: his role will only be to understand those others, in whose name he cannot act. And also and as a consequence of this choice, he must abstain from taking a position in his society, for fear of choosing one that is also found in the others, and thus avoid any prejudice in his thinking.

But let us look at the author's journey through this evolutionary process, both geographical and intellectual. In the first part, the author talks about travel in general. He recalls his first trip to South America, and Brazil more precisely, in 1935. Twenty years later, Levi-Strauss recalls this trip and a certain nostalgia, a poetic idealization, seeps even unintentionally into the supposedly objective lines of a scientist, whose power of observation is his greatest instrument, the hands of a surgeon or the eyes of a laboratory

researcher. The poetics of language is not a mere artifice, but arises from a great narrative skill that uses only what is essential from the literary so that his story takes on the hues of someone who speaks not in a conference room, but in the living room of any house, during or after a dinner, or perhaps around a campfire. The journey through these tropics, for someone who has already traveled a lot and carefully observed the cultures encountered, is a journey that is not a mere artifice, but rather a journey that is not a mere artifice, but ... In its wake, it always implies a comparison, even beyond what is conscious. A smell smelled in Brazil suggests a street visited in the Philippines. An arid landscape brings back memories of a part of New England. Comparison is not born only from similarities, but also from contrasts, and this is the richness that nourishes and feeds the thoughts and reflective judgment of the ethnographer. If this interest in the landscape and in things is transferred to the observation of native populations, the judgment must include moral values that produce friction and clashes that the ethnographer must avoid so that the contact surfaces, that is, the relationships, lose all irregularity and edge that is harmful to research.

The relationship of ethnography with other disciplines is essential. An ethnographer must be a philosopher, a psychologist, and a geologist. For this reason, he must be able to see in the arts of ancient cultures an interpretation of these, since he himself is an artist of history: he must interpret as he interprets a piece of art. It is not strange, then, that later on, Levi-Strauss insists on his own strangeness when he tells us that in the middle of the Amazon, the melody of a Chopin waltz came to his mind repeatedly. He tells us that he did not have a special affinity with this musician, but he did not particularly like his music. In reality, his preference fell on Debussy or Stravinsky, and on reflection he realizes that from the technical complexity of these authors he had managed to rescue, to "sediment", perhaps, the simplicity underlying Chopin's melody. An explorer, he says, has the function of scrutinizing. And that, I think, sums up the function of the ethnographer. The rest are only words, opinions susceptible to all refutation. Perhaps, all the rest, like the great philosophical theories of Kant, are enormous works of art that thought has taken upon itself to construct in that fragile and beautiful place, like a zoo or glass museum, which is the human mind. The entire second half of the work is a very detailed description of the four aboriginal groups that the author visited in Brazil. In this way, we learn about the paintings of the Caduveo, whose meaning is still a mystery; the layout of the village and the social laws among the Bororo; the somewhat violent primitivism of the Nambiquara or the almost 18th century kindness of the Tapí-Kawaíb. In a region as vast as France, his own country, Levi-Strauss finds a tiny population, whose ancestors have been decimated by epidemics brought by the white man, but among whom one can find greater contrasts than in the entire contemporary population of a region with the same characteristics in Western society. Prejudices and condescensions, revenge and passions are the same factors that have always mobilized man, but in each culture they



are shaped in a certain way, adopting the form of laws or customs. Contrasts create borders, and where there are borders there are conflicts. These problems have always been resolved by war. But it is curious that these villages of people apparently stuck in time do not adopt these violent measures easily. There are few of them left, they know it, sometimes a village is simply a family, and they have matured, perhaps more wisely than all contemporary civilization.

In short, Levi-Strauss offers us a work that is neither a travel book nor strictly a scientific study, it is not a philosophical study of humanity nor a comparative sociological theory between ancient and modern society, or primitive and civilized. It is all of these at the same time, and above all it is a work of scientific and artistic literature, only in the way in which both points of view can come together without conflict, complementary, forming a symbiosis whose significance is greater, more comprehensive, not clearly in accordance with the canons of dissemination or easy-going. Perhaps something like a work of art, like those paintings of the Caduveo, where the geometric forms are representations and symbols of reality.

Ambrose Bierce

## Short Stories

This commentary is based on two quite disparate anthologies of Bierce's short stories. The first is entitled *The Bridge over Owl River*, and includes a not very complete but sufficiently informative introduction about the author and his time. Also interesting is the division of the stories according to the books from which they were taken, which allows the reader a rough idea of the characteristics of each book and of the changes in the author throughout his work. I repeat that this task of the editors is interesting but rather superficial. In any case, it serves as a very good introduction for those who have not read Bierce before. The second anthology is entitled *The Parricides' Club*, which in this case is the original title of one of his books, but not all of them are included here. That belong to this one and others are added. This last edition is characterized only by the homogeneity of the stories chosen, as well as by the accurate translation by Daniel Kaminski. This brings us to talk about the production and in particular about Bierce's stories. If I said before that the stories chosen in the second anthology had homogeneity, it is because they are all characterized by one of the branches of the author's short story writing, the one that is more particularized by the absurd than by horror. Both are transcendental lines in his work. On the one hand, direct horror, without ambiguity, as for example in the stories collected in his collection *Can this happen?*, or in the *Tales of civilians*. Here the fantastic is the primordial

element, but the genre is limited not so much by the direct and unprejudiced approach, but by a careful and very literary language that tends to contain unnecessary excesses. Here the horror is suggested more by the mystery than by the words, which, despite being direct in their description of the terrible, never fall into bad taste. The mystery is what remains as the background and as the guiding axis of these stories. The description is still stark and direct, as we have already said, but it is measured and put at the service of a story that remains within the range of the plausible. It is extremely difficult to explain it and even more difficult to achieve this balance. An author can limit his morbid excesses and achieve a good narrative, but it is much more complicated to achieve the balance between two worlds that are not so different. Perhaps an appropriate image would be to describe Bierce as walking along a high edge between two abysses: one reality and the other fantasy. Both are as possible as they are impossible, and therefore in both different explanations or causes are tolerated.

There is not so much psychological work in literature, although the psychological explanation of the facts and the characters can never be completely ruled out. What makes these stories stand out is their inclusion in a strange world, which does not necessarily have to be fantastic, because most of them are not. They are common places, cities and forests, cabins and battlefields. In all these places, however, there is something strange given by the look of the characters. A typical example where both the fantastic and the real or psychological elements blend perfectly is the one that gives title to the first selection mentioned above. There we have a man about to be hanged by his enemies in the American Civil War. Halfway through the story and the reasons for his sentence explained, he is executed, but apparently the rope breaks and the man falls into the river, where he can swim and escape from the shots of his enemies. While he flees, he remembers his family, and can see them for a moment on the riverbank. Finally, we learn that his body is still hanging from the bridge, and everything has happened in the infinitesimal moments before his death. In other tales, ghost stories predominate, but these are not crude or capricious apparitions, but elements that are more important than the real characters, even more important than the story itself. Because these ghosts do not need to be expressed in words, and their actions are minimal. Their mere appearance is already an explanation of what is hidden not within the walls of a house, but in the minds of the characters related to them, for example, in the masterful tale *The Middle Toe of the Right Foot*.

The second line already mentioned is that of sarcastic tales. Here the fantastic continues to predominate, but in this case the fantastic does not represent a supernatural event, or if it does, it is not given to us as something too strange for the point of view of the characters. It could even be said that for them fantastic events are mere factors of everyday life, as plausible as ordinary ones. Are not the causes of trivial events sometimes stranger? Who determines the limits of the possible, not to mention the

uncertain boundaries of verisimilitude? This is where Bierce plays, in the ambiguity of causes and not of facts. In these stories we can find a family that makes oil from the bodies of fetuses and children, a hypnotist who induces his victims to murder, or a family dedicated to killing and whose members are taught from the age of five. The parameters of logic and common sense are upset not from a chaotic or confusing point of view, but rather it is what is established as normal that suffers ruptures and adaptations, to take on new forms, similar to what is usually accepted as normal and moral, but which impose new conducts of life. Here murder and crime rub shoulders with the everyday, and therefore are taken with the triviality of everyday life. This could be called black humor, but there are no direct humorous situations, perhaps irony, no doubt, but in a way that brings it closer to grotesque satire.

Bierce's style never takes him away from the possible, as if we were reading a current newspaper article, so full of the pathetic mixture of truth and lies, of madness and tragedy, or the story of a friend who tells us in his own way an anecdote experienced on a trip or in an administrative office, where the absurd is embellished with certain subjective exaggerations. If we think about these situations, it is not difficult for us to extrapolate them to these stories by Bierce where the absurd takes root in the place of the real, takes root in the soil, and grows, giving leaves and fruits that not long after will no longer seem as strange to us as at the beginning. Then, the implausible does not fall because of its inherent falsehood, but is sustained by the grotesque and the curious, proving as attractive as a bestiary of men.

The same rules apply to Bierce's realistic stories. In them, the tragic is determined by men themselves, just like horror in fantastic tales.

Bierce does not make humor out of horror, but rather extracts from it the laughable, the grotesque, like a smile of evil or sarcasm. Who knows, after all, in these dark areas and territories, the exact limits, the borders that we try to establish with simple words?

Henríquez

Phil's Cafeteria (2009)

This collection of poems (whose pseudonym hides, protects or symbolizes, according to its intentions, the true name of the author, and which I consider obligatory to mention here in honor of the quality of his poetry: Ariel Güallar) could be summarized, in my opinion, in a few verses from the penultimate poem: "Stories/like mirrors/or sunken cars." In this brief,

precise and clear way, a whole conception of the author's view of the world is contained, or rather the result that the vision of the world has caused in his eyes, now receiving from them a look close to cynicism, but without its paralyzing or negative features. Sarcasm and irony contribute their nuances, and humor takes on acidic hues without becoming grotesque or pessimistic. The look, therefore, is lethal, as in one of the first poems: *Hasta que*, but it can also be nostalgic and of a sensitivity bordering on the emotional, as in *Allá arriba*.

The chosen style is also particular, because it creates in the poems an intermediate space between the real and the imagined. Perception is not explained or described, but "translated" with words that acquire a rhythm achieved with a variety of resources: double meanings taken from the collective unconscious, literary metaphors, images of all kinds that are characterized by their low-profile originality, even surrealist or symbolist resources. The latter are a new twist to this poetic method, since without being a direct heir, it takes the same twisted and far-fetched vision to mold it to a personal, more local, autochthonous view. The clearest example is *Una visita*, where surrealist poets rub shoulders with each other in an environment where time and space become a game of their own imagination. It can also be seen, applied less as a literary game than as a true poem, in *Salutación revisitada*. The themes are varied, and can be classified in a general way as travel poems, where routes and open landscapes are other forms of poetic representation; Long poems, where clear but never ideological satire predominates, only sarcastic about man in general, as in *Don Diego*; short poems, with precise and forceful concepts enclosed in definitions of apparent innocence, as in *Difference* or *Similarity*; poems of nostalgia and memory, such as *Dog-fish* or *Up There*.

Phil's cafeteria is a separate section, which contains a set of poems that have in common, in addition to their style, the same space, which under the author's gaze, is more a poetic place than a physical one. Ghosts and people meet in this cafeteria, but it is also a place where other times and places converge. Rivers and ports enrich the poetic atmosphere, like "a parade of lost towns," quoting the author himself, or rather like "inexact locations." But all this, which would seem like a chaos of confusion, is simply an amalgam of spices or chemical substances, an alchemy of barely perceptible smell, which has the property of generating images in the reader, of evoking hidden spaces and memories, almost lost in the mind of each one. Attics or routes, bars or rooms. Güallar knows how to summon them with his low, but very sharp voice.

Ricardo Krakovsky

Vertebras los días (2009)

The title is a little disconcerting, it is true. Colloquial grammar seems to be challenged and left aside this time. A noun used in this case as an adjective. Not as a verb, that is to say: *vertebras los días*, but *los días c*Like *vertebrae*. So, *Vertebrae, Days* establishes from the beginning a concept, a conception: time counted not as an uninterrupted line, but as a sum of successive fragments, be they minutes, hours, days, etc. Any measurement is suitable to define a chain of temporal cells that the author has decided to compare or represent as *vertebrae* of the body. This choice is not arbitrary, because one of the repeated themes of this collection of poems is that of the body seen as a reflection or symbol of the exterior. The body is also something external, something that others see, of course, but not by us, at least not completely, except when we look in a mirror, and this represents an artifice, an artifact that we use as a means of communication with the world (to see ourselves as others see us, or at least approximately). Therefore, the body, for its own owner, is something almost also internal, like the soul and thoughts, like feelings or everything that lies deeper and alien to all definition. These poems speak of love (*Distancia, Desenjaula*), of time (*Futuro, Las horas*), of the body (the cycle *De mis manos*). They speak of a double gaze, a mirror that is no longer an artefact but a double gaze, for example in the poems *Ojos vista, Versiones de la cosa, Ese*, the cycle *Lecturas*. There is a set of poems dedicated to various cities or countries, where the description seems to predominate, but it is a simple pretext to present an inner vision of the city, the inner city that dazzled the poet at the time and that now reaches us as a fragment rescued from memory, filtered and imbued with an appropriate, austere, precise lyricism. This leads us to say that in these poems we can find various resources, which speak to us of the maturity and skill of the author, and all of them can be grouped into two almost contrasting poetic tones: one more traditional, where musicality predominates and a rhythm that leads to nostalgia, where one can almost hear native musical echoes, both urban and rural, without ever falling into the easy way of mentioning them, because it is something intuitive, simply, something implicit in the music of the poem, which can be seen in the cycle dedicated to cities, but predominates in the majority; the other is a more broken rhythm, although not hermetic or confusing, this is seen in *Vertebrados* and the two poems of *Word*. We can also find certain influences by tone and theme, by rhythm: *Juárroz* and *Porchia* come to mind for the attentive reader of these poems by *Krakovsky*. In short, this collection of poems brings together both the merit of its pretension and its achievement, both compatible, as cause and effect, or question and answer. *Krakovsky* has proposed to speak to us and to himself about time, or life, which may be the same and one thing, and to make it even clearer I transcribe a fragment that sums up all this: "If we measure this hour/for example/she/slowly frozen/begins to count our ribs...

Viviana Abnur

Delta (2009)

Abnur has accustomed us with her previous poetry books (*Who Killed Bambi?* and *August*) to expect from her poems that are few in number, very brief and above all of an austerity bordering on silence. A silence in which the poet seems submerged between book and book, only broken when she decides to show, as if the printed page were audible and not also a part of silence, her poems obtained or rescued from the silence where she has gone to look for them. Brevity is not always a virtue, nor is austerity a value in itself. They only acquire relevance when applied to a deep and valuable idea, an idea so intense, strong and sharp that it must be taken and explored, almost dissected, with extreme care and delicacy. It is not pleasant to make distinctions between masculine or feminine poems, a good poem goes beyond genres. But when we talk about the point of view and the treatment that a poet gives to the things and objects that he has decided to take as the substance of his poetry, there is an inevitable distinction. It is not the same when the dissection of reality, be it emotional, material or historical, is done with the delicacy and parsimony only attributed to a certain type of women. The gaze of the one we are dealing with now is timid and accurate at the same time, it is a reserved and extremely discreet gaze, cruel but at the same time of a tenderness of exquisite elegance. The themes addressed in this new collection are not different from those of the previous books, the same concerns continue to be the object of her gaze: human relationships, whether they are between couples, family, or as is often found in Abnur, between an older woman and a younger one. Relationships that in this case are "embodied" by everyday objects, generally things from a house, objects or even domestic tasks or common jobs. In all of them, the author's work is based on the same principles as in Abnur's books. In these poems we find a slow rhythm, proper to reflection, which leads to depth almost without realizing it. Of course there must be important ideas for there to be depth, because only heavy or overwhelming things are capable of sinking the trivial surface on which we move daily. These ideas can be the past, love, disappointment, the transient, death. In these new poems Abnur respects his style, but changes the format a little. Here he adopts the form of a prose without punctuation marks or capital letters, but the verses continue to retain their internal pauses. When reading them, there is no confusion or doubt. There is no hermeticism, no symbolic or allegorical images. The metaphor is so subtle that it seems not to exist. That is the great merit of these poems. I said before that everyday things are representative of other, more internal realities, but this representation is constructed and molded with the same gentleness with which it has led us by the hand to the aforementioned deep regions. The author herself defines the conception of a style in one of her

poems: "we create an everyday language full of synonyms," which determines both a limitation, due to the inevitable darkness or confusion that hides the truth, and an unfathomable possibility of expressions and variations on all things in the world. But the new choice of format does not change anything in terms of Abnur's aesthetic choice, that is, her poetic choice. The same pauses were already present in the poems of the other books, with similar concerns, and above all the same serious, sad and sweet look, with hands that explore and do not know how to tremble when it comes to glimpsing the truth hidden in each thing.

## Thucydides

### History of the Peloponnesian War (circa 410 BC)

It is not a novel, but a history book. But like any initial idea, it is a concept that will be modified throughout the reading of the 900 pages that make up this chronicle of a war that lasted more than twenty years. The writer himself defines himself as a historian, and in the first chapters he renounces the poets (in relation to Homer, although he does not mention him) and Herodotus (who preceded him in this art), and therefore his vision is necessarily subjective, detailed and minute-oriented, although his marked attempt at impartiality is meritorious and very worthy of admiration. Another important factor is the time that has passed since the narration of these events. The old style of writing was based on stories and chronicles heard by voices of others or seen personally, which were circulated from place to place, by word of mouth. The documentation for historians of that time was null or scarce, as a consequence their chronicles had to be constructed based on facts that could well not be true, but in whose truth they had to trust. From here comes the style of his narration, a heroic style of epic, from which the novel itself was born. Very diffuse limits separate the historical epic from the novel. What we now call a historical novel does not come close to these literary monuments, firstly because of its quality, and secondly because they were constructed at the same time as the events. If we can draw any parallel, perhaps it would be with the novels about the First World War written by American authors in the first post-war period. But returning to Thucydides, the author himself was an active participant in the war on the side of the Athenians, then he was exiled for political reasons. And from this exile in the lands of the opposing side, he decided to tell the story of this war from the beginning and in a way that was as impartial as it was full of a cruel and stark description of the events. We can highlight several factors in the merits of this work.

1) Structure: although the author denies "that poet" who distorted the truth, his work also uses dramatization to tell the story. There are no documents to provide, but the voices of the participants in the war, whose speeches are recreated as if the reader were listening to them. The mention of Homer is not a disqualification either, Thucydides even transcribes a part of one of his poems in this story. There is, however, no trace of implausibility in these recreated speeches. On the contrary, they are the ones that give a touch of humanity to the events described, and bring the episodes closer to the reader by showing them a vision, a personal, partial and interested point of view according to the character who speaks, but for this very reason more characterized, more spontaneous and more familiar both by the virtues and by the vices or defects that they reveal. Another important element of the structure is the simultaneity of the events in the same chapter, narrated with a full stop without causing any confusion. What happens in one sector of the country is contrasted with what happens simultaneously

2) Elements: the instruments used by the warriors are just as many for the author himself. He uses them to describe the battles: mechanical machines, hand-to-hand combat, innumerable ships, weapons of all kinds. These elements are countless and it would be difficult to enumerate them, but their detailed mention accentuates the notion of reality. It gives the reader the sensation of seeing naval battles, hearing the sound of weapons and the screams of men, of smelling the odor of blood and fire. 3) Strategies: just like in the previous item, speeches, betrayals, rebellions, massacres, walls built to besiege or defend cities, truces that are never kept, are implicit methodologies in the work of war, and which the author uses masterfully to build his narrative. It is true that he does nothing more than recount the facts, but there are ways and ways of telling. Perhaps, oral inheritance has been the main merit of formation and learning for the correct narration of a story. Perhaps, the very fact of deciding in a few seconds and during the same narration what to tell or leave silent, what order to give to the effects and their causes, is the first and most important antecedent of all written literature. Thucydides undoubtedly knew this, because he knew how to subtly introduce veiled irony and betrayal in each speech, thus giving a personality to each protagonist, he knew how to put emphasis on individual and collective betrayals for personal, emotional or petty interests as gears of war. Truces, he knew, were signed not to be fulfilled, like pauses and temporary silences that hid unsatisfied hatred or resentment. The construction of the walls is another factor of immense importance for the future that we, contemporaries of the 21st century, know well. Regarding the massacres, there is no need to say more than that they are stories of overwhelming familiarity, and that, despite being repeated and known, in this case, in the hands of a great writer, they do not fail to provoke the same and even greater feeling of discomfort and horror. Betrayals and rebellions are complexly intricate strategies, confused in a political situation where each island and city changed sides according to convenience or fear of the power in power. All this is very clearly exposed



by the same skill with which the author took charge of capturing the material elements that we mentioned before. Pitched battles are no bigger or crueller than the betrayals and political manoeuvres that took place in the Athenian senate or gymnasiums, or in the far-off provinces of the Aegean Sea.

4) Men: the characters in this war are the soldiers and warriors, the officers and captains, some of whom are also thinkers and philosophers, others doctors and writers or historians. Their speeches demonstrate their culture and personal worth, even if they show a double interest. Two opposing pairs are examples of this admirable personification: Bracidas, leader of the Peloponnesians, and Thucydides himself, leader of the Athenians. Even though the author appears little, his sincerity forces him to show the almost abysmal difference with his opponent. Even though Bracidas is his enemy, he shows his worth as a person and as a warrior. His skill has defeated him, and those who drive Thucydides out are the Athenians themselves. The other contrasting pair is that of Alcibiades, a Peloponnesian, and Nicias, an Athenian. Here the literary merits are even greater, because the complexity of both is exquisitely shown. Alcibiades sums up all that the bad virtues of war are capable of: a spirit interested in personal advantage, a thirst for violence, betrayal for convenience, switching sides at will and provoking political schemes. Nicias is a discreet Athenian, reluctant to start a war but willing to do anything to defend his men. Nicias's personality is noble, his body, however, begins to show weakness, a kidney pain that he mentions in his letters and that only accentuates the literary merits of both the author and the character. Here, then, is the hidden poetry of Thucydides, the way in which, without abandoning history as a reality and science, he takes charge of revealing the poetics hidden in human events.

5) Causes of the wars: at first there were conflicts between the Corinthians and the Greeks. It was the Arcinians who led Athens and the Peloponnese to support each other, but they were only excuses for previous resentments, and above all for something that has not changed since then, and which Thucydides reveals very well. War is a business, both for the governments involved and for individuals. For ten years the war drags on, then interrupted by a truce that is only observed in the agreements signed by the ambassadors. Soon the war is renewed with greater impetus with a new excuse: the island of Argos rebels and becomes independent, making agreements with the Athenians. At the same time, a conflict between natives of Sicily provokes the help of the Athenians, and the Peloponnesians are called to counter this invasion of Athens. Thus begins the second stage of the war, which prolongs the conflict for more than twenty years. This second stage serves as an incentive for the work, because as befits a novel, the second half takes on a new dimension, reaching much greater dramatic levels than in the first half. The naval battles around Sicily are of great narrative skill, the siege of Syracuse acquires enormous drama and is exemplary for any narrator worth his salt.

The penultimate book constitutes the climax, with the end of the Athenian fleet destroyed and its members hunted down and killed. And with Nicias, the noble warrior, dead instead of captured and returned to Athens. The last book is a kind of epilogue where political strategies predominate, where betrayals are more abundant than battles, where Athenian democracy is replaced by oligarchy. But this work tries to get away from all partiality or stereotypes. The Athenians are not the staunch defenders of democracy or the Peloponnesian savage warriors. Here the ambivalence of the characters is the only certainty, the only constant. At the beginning we ask ourselves: should a history book be like a novel, does it provide seriousness and verisimilitude? Should documentation or entertainment prevail? Or a mixture of both? The only way to answer these questions is to apply them to each particular text. If we talk about Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, the answer is: one learns more about history by getting closer to the personalities of the protagonists, and only a writer who knows the virtues of poetry can do so.

Margaret Atwood

The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

This novel, published at the age of 61, is a perfect example of what a lifetime of disciplined practice of good literature can achieve. The personal, emotional and psychological maturity of an author is only one part of the proper achievement of an artistic work. The rest is inevitably contributed by the skill acquired over the years of work, and above all the permanent concern to ensure that each work is an original individuality in itself. To do this, the style of each author plays a role, his or her personal stamp, whether it be the point of view, the grammatical forms, the way of structuring the times and rhythms, or the treatment chosen for each theme. Atwood is characterized by a curious, apparently unintentional symbiosis of various literary resources. In it we can find a third-person narrator but undoubtedly attached to the point of view of the main character, or a first-person narrator, as is the case in this novel, where the narration, however, does not cease to be comprehensive and even landscape-like, since it works at an intermediate point that fulfills the function of description that the adopted genre, in this case the futuristic or moderate science fiction, requires to become credible. So we have already raised the first important point. This novel participates in the genre of futuristic fantasy without conforming to the narrow limits of a particular genre. A good writer usually has varied concerns, and if at some point he shows a preference for a certain genre, he does not take it as a market option, but as an affective, sensitive choice, a means that serves to focus on

certain themes or objectives. Another important point is Atwood's narrative style. In general, she tends to be detached, even when she writes in the first person, but as we have already said, the interweaving of points of view, subtle and well worked, or the temporal changes, which function not as strict narrative instruments but as hinges of the same painted panel, like contrasting colors within the narrative. This style, then, somewhat cold and concise, collaborates in the construction of a character, adhering to the certainly oppressive and distressing climate.

The entire novel, despite its variety of environment, its futuristic scenery not too contrasting with the present but which does accentuate certain sharper, more hurtful and dangerous aspects, gives the necessary and exact touch to its The author places the reader in a strange and dangerous situation. The whole scenario, both from the external description and from the internal twists and turns of the protagonist's memories and uncertainties, shows a labyrinth with no way out. A labyrinth created by humanity itself by falling into repeated historical cycles that humanity itself tends to forget in order to give each new cycle a false sense of novelty. As for the plot, the style manages a delicate balance between the plausible and the implausible, mainly due to the short time between the changes described. And this short time is irreversibly marked or determined by a woman's fertile time. That is to say, in just twenty or twenty-five years, such marked changes must occur from today's society, where democracy is, in theory, generally and officially established, to an autocratic, violent and discriminatory government. The entire novel is a slow discovery, through the protagonist's sporadic memories, of the events that led to the current situation, and the way of transmitting them, traveling through literary flashbacks appropriately constructed and measured. The tone, which is both distanced due to the fact that it is an unwritten chronicle, and at the same time committed, due to being in the first person, is a very high achievement in this novel. There is a certain tendency - rather clearly intuited but read between the lines, which is how extra-literary messages should be left, whether social or moralizing - feminist, demonstrable in the characteristics that future society has taken. But this tendency lacks any qualifying idea, much less accusatory or challenging towards the male gender. The author, as a good narrator, does not have such a superficial objective, but rather the intention is, perhaps, and I mention only one of the multiple interpretations or ramifications of the text and its implicit meanings, to give a conclusive demonstration by its own weight, to which the austerity of the language undoubtedly contributes, that the violent nature of human beings in general is always latent, and as soon as the opportunity offers the necessary means for impunity and the absence of blame and punishment, it is always directed towards degrading, discriminatory, humiliating acts, of which minorities or weaker or more vulnerable beings become victims. And this victimization does not come only from one gender, but from both men and women.

The plot does not forget to make it clear that every government or system imposed by force is also a façade, a farce that serves to hide other darker, more particular interests, as shown for example in the rules or laws instituted, which with the objective of avoiding or punishing crimes serve to hide many others. There are always cracks in these systems, forces that grow supposedly hidden, rebellions in formation that serve to relieve the tension of any tyranny, which would otherwise become unsustainable by its very implicit tension. But the end of the novel also makes it clear that these same rebellious forces have their own appearances, owners in turn of an ambiguity of objectives that confuses them with the predominant forces. Then, the protagonist wonders in whose hands she is trapped: if she has finally fallen out of favor with the imposed system, and they come to look for her in the symbolic black van, or if in reality the rebels come to rescue her, disguised under the mask of the tyrant. Or are both, we wonder as readers, “the same”?

The allegory, therefore, is evident, but secondary in itself. The literary objectives take the novel beyond allegory or symbolism. Atwood creates a credible world founded on a mental system that is none other than that of each reader, and which carries with it its own anguish and sense of entrapment. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an uncomfortable story that confronts us with characteristics that we know are latent in each one of us but we prefer not to see, hidden, temporarily, by the weak forces of the laws and forced coexistence. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a history manual of the future.

### Dancing Girls (1977)

These fourteen stories constitute an anthology published in 1977, that is, when the author was 48 years old. It is not strange, then, that they represent part of the best of her literary maturity. If we start from a general analysis, the first thing that stands out is the excellence of the writing, the adequate treatment for each story and the social and intimate themes of the stories. But going deeper, we see that there are comThis is the grammatical style that is usually found. The author usually uses the present tense to relate immediate or past situations, interspersing different tenses in the same sentence. This does not result, however, in any incongruity or confusion, because she has taken care to first place the reader in a situation and in the perspective of a character, therefore the changes in time tend to give a particular impression or sensation of the character, for whom the past is an indivisible part of his present, as in all memories. Another grammatical peculiarity is the measured but notable resource of an apparent change in point of view, which is not such in itself, but a way in which the protagonist, through whom we are living the story, is able to know the thoughts or feelings of the other protagonists. For this, the imagination capacity of the main character, which is neither greater

nor less than that of any of us when we ponder or reflect on various situations or conflicts, is the resource that allows us to know the other characters. So, through what the protagonist knows for sure or imagines, we have an increasingly detailed picture of the plot of the story. Another common theme is that most of the stories are about women, but this is not the result of a deliberately feminist stance. Atwood writes about what she knows best, and the result is a range of women who impress not so much for their diversity but for their intensity. Almost all of them are women we might consider anonymous, dull. None of them is considered to be of great external beauty or of an overwhelming personality, or even of outstanding intelligence. They are women who have clearly resigned themselves to certain limits in their social and personal lives. Disillusionment in love, permanent and concealed marginalization has accustomed them to resign themselves. This is evident in the stories *The Martian* and *Betty*. In a fragment of *Joyería capilar*, the protagonist says to herself: "The platonic version I had of myself resembled an Egyptian mummy, a mysteriously wrapped object that could crumble and be reduced to dust when unwrapped. But unrequited love did not require nudity." The author's point of view does not limit her to a gender. There are stories where the protagonist is male, and both in these and where the characters' male partners are seen through female eyes, the concern is to show an unmistakable aspect of the behavior of men and women without pity or judgment. Men and women, simply, as human beings. In the story *Chicas bailaras*, the protagonist asks herself "what should I be a man for?"

The next common feature is the landscapes that serve as a frame. Almost without exception, the setting is the city, but this city is almost always a post-war city, with the aftermath of abandoned and destroyed houses and with sectors of new and temporary constructions that uniform the city with an undifferentiated, monotonous and austere appearance. The houses are artificial, without personality, with decorations in bad taste, all the same and precarious. These images collaborate in another common factor of Atwood, creating climates that simulate or insinuate future situations. This aspect appears in stories such as *When It Happens*, where the imaginative is also a real form of knowledge of the future as well as a way of daydreaming and escape. It can also be seen in *The Grave of the Famous Poet*, where there is an imagined parallelism between the protagonist's partner and the poet whose region she is going to visit. Within the theme of the landscape, we must locate the function occupied by plants, animals and stones, which constitute a symbolist narrative tool, in reality a rather curious aspect in the apparent social reality of the author's narrative. Nature represents, even in a wild and primitive way, a return to the individuality of the human being, and this can be seen most clearly in the story *Polarities*, but also in *Translucent* and *Dancing Girls*, although in the latter there is a clearer relationship between the different degrees of sociability and tolerance, where discrimination, hypocrisy and mistrust are the consequences of a clearly marked contrast between two points of view: the innocence of the protagonist and the intolerance of the landlady.

Of course, the theme of the man-woman relationship is one of the main axes, if not the most important, of most of these stories. There are phrases that typically show what Atwood thinks and wants to express on this subject, for example in *The Grave of the Famous Poet*, where the following is said of a couple of lovers: "We lie shoulder to shoulder, both suffering from unrequited love." There are stories that go beyond these common aspects and tolerate many more interpretations. For example, in *Cumon* features of Atwood's style that stand out in each story, not taking away its individuality, but characterizing it as a fragment with a life of its own that is in turn a part of a more complex whole. First of all, it is curious. What happens is that we have a mature couple who begin to encounter social changes that indicate an evident conflict, and in the face of which they must leave the house and escape. This story with futuristic connotations, always austere and exact in the clues it leaves us, tolerates both this interpretation and also the thought that everything is nothing but the imagination of the woman who tells the story, as an escape from a monotonous life. Imagination, then, is not only capable of everything, but is also born of multiple interpretations: escape?, premonition?, madness?, right? *Hair Jewelry* is the most sinister story of the set, but this element is secondary until the end arrives, where the truth is hinted at with enough force to be indisputable. In *The Resplendent Quetzal* there is an evident symbolism between the ancient sacrifice and the son that the woman has lost as soon as he was born, but it also joins with the imagination of the protagonist when she feels herself a pledge of sacrifice for her husband, the inverse way of the guilt that makes him responsible for the death of the baby. *Learning* is a story from a male and adolescent point of view, where hypocrisies and sentimentalisms regarding the sick are exposed, "dogmas" that represent rules that are difficult to break, like those that the protagonist must face in the face of the designs and decisions of his parents. He must choose not only whether to submit to them or confront them, but decide what he really wants, and all of this by seeing and learning from the falsehoods of a society more concerned with appearances than with the truth. *The Sin Eater* is an intense story full of symbolism. The patient of a psychiatrist remembers her conversations at his funeral, while talking with the doctor's three ex-wives. Here, the ritual, always related to the primitive, a common theme that we have already seen, is the one that he once told her about the women who eat the sins of the deceased. She dreams, then, the following night, of the three wives serving the cookies that they brought to serve the guests at the wake, and of them eating them, deliberately and consciously, over the corpse. All these stories are exquisitely crafted and impeccably produced. The narrative excellence is added to the depth of the varied and original treatment of such transcendent themes as human relations, the complexity of life and the characteristics of death.

Aguas salobres (1983) El lugar (1984)

This Uruguayan writer, born in 1940, is considered a cult writer by almost a generation after his own. Owner of an imaginary world that is absolutely his own and tremendously rich, heir to the best European fantastic literary imagery, he remained for a large part of his life almost on the fringes of the literary world, devoting himself to writing novels and stories that were only published more frequently after the 1980s. One of the causes, which does not serve as a justification for his lack of knowledge by the general public, but which is useful to us as a motive and explanation, is his strange style. "Strange" is the closest word to describe it, although this adjective is often overused, applied to many and varied literary styles, almost all of them far removed to a greater or lesser extent from the most conventional form of literature. In Levrero's case, the strange is rooted in literary lands, that is, in a grammatical and structural process, which from the beginning is altered not in its visual form but in its own concept of logic. Let's see if we can be clearer. In the stories of Saltwater, and especially in the first one, The Moebius Strip, we find a story that begins apparently linear, but that little by little shows elements that first approach the limits of plausibility and then become completely absurd for formal logic. Later, the story not only confirms this tendency, but goes beyond its own achievements, distorting, in addition to the temporal and spatial, the entire mental structure on which the human being bases the most basic of his sanity. But more than a path of madness, it is a path similar to the twists and turns of a dream, where the mixture of desires, drives and repressions take turns to dominate the characters and the scenes, in a game of alternating forces, where each episode has its meaning, without standing out, however, above the meaning of the others. But all this is given not with the climate proper to the dream, but with a grammatical style that seems to be telling real events, or rather, it tells us both the real and the imaginary on the same plane of existence, confusing the limits between both. In this way, by giving "logic" to dreams and "distortion" to reality, it creates a third half plane of constant verisimilitude.

There are two ways to enjoy a story: appreciating the structure and language, on the one hand, and the plot content, on the other. Few are the stories that bring together both elements masterfully. In most, one of the two prevails, which justifies them. In the case of Moebius, the dreamlike - externally - and the psychological - internally -, according to the reader's choice, justify the union of the events of the story, be it called life, experience or evolutionary or experimental journey. It is not strange that the story begins with the comment of a boy who during the night hears his parents talking in bed about going on a trip, nor is it a coincidence that this boy mentions his habit, typical of childhood, of stopping to think about the limit between wakefulness and sleep, and his always failed intention of

staying awake until discovering the exact moment when he falls asleep, as if he wanted to discover the arrival of the Three Wise Men in the middle of the night. But sleep and awakening are on the same plane of reality, the one given by the author, and that is how everything begins. The other stories are less chaotic in their creation and interpretation, the allegory is clearer, but without the intention of being allegorical, as it should be in good stories. The abandoned house is an excellent descriptive story, where the strange and fantastic things that inhabit that house are detailed in a concise, brief manner, without great narrative effects or bad taste. They are only mentioned as comments on curious, strange events, for which no explanation is sought. The umbrellas is one of Levrero's best stories, Kafkaesque in its tone, but with a luminosity that, contrary to Kafka's darkness and oppression, curiously exerts the same effect: absurdity and anguish with a touch of black humor that is born from that same grotesque. This characteristic prevails in the last story, Saltwater, where the grotesque is taken to extreme limits. The absurd here takes on meaning through the precise, measured language, yet overflowing with images that disturb but do not disturb good taste, and which add value to the story in two ways: exoticism and meaning, both united, mutually nourishing. To all this is added a tone of traditional and dark legend but transformed by a personal literary style, which is evident and very successful through the narrative structure and the flow of the narrative. The legend of the water gods, Christianity, sex, desires, the human body, are all elements that are incorporated and give meaning, both in this and in the other stories, to a bold narrative structure, distorted in its logical form, but with literary values that stand out for their very strangeness and the significant and emotional levels that it reaches. The emotion here is not sentimental, of course, but intellectual, challenging even the values established in the reader's mind with regard to the limits we have already spoken of above: be it formal, logical or unreal. The Place is a novel published in 1984, but signed by the author himself in 1969, that is, when he was 29 years old. Its characteristics are different from those of the stories discussed above. From a formal and external point of view, its language is more conventional and the structure is more linear, and its argumentative logic, at first sight, is inevitably related to Kafka. But these characteristics are only formal. The novel progresses slowly but not sluggishly, but with a parsimony and a pause suitable for the reader to incorporate the strangeness of the situation that is presented to the protagonist: his isolation in a dark room, which is then followed by a series of identical rooms, from which it is impossible to escape. This approach is not presented in a fantastical way, but the narrator's mind adapts to the logic of his protagonist: he analyzes, despairs, suffers, desires, yearns, and above all, does not conform. The protagonist's successive vicissitudes confront him with situations that seem to be allegories and symbols of an external world, or perhaps of his own life. The rooms are first dark, then with furniture and food, then with some inhabitants with whom he cannot communicate. He meets a woman whom he possesses one night. Then the rooms deteriorate, there is rubble, there



are dead men and women. The second part of the novel places the character in what is presumed to be the outside, but which is still another part of that strange place. Here he meets other people, and they live in a precarious society of survivors that must soon break up due to divergent interests. What is common in these first two parts is the character's desire for non-conformity. His situation presents him with two possible solutions: conform and survive where he is, or continue looking for a way out. But successive failures and his own reflections make him think that perhaps there is no way out, which He is already outside. Is it a dream, the concretisation of desires and frustrations, alterations of time and space? Is it an alteration of his own psyche? The concise, precise style gives rise to the necessary ambiguity, so that clearly every explanation is significant and at the same time partial and incomplete. The third part shows us the arrival in a chaotic and violent city. The events rush, the actions are faster and the events and secondary characters lose all logic and absurdity, now without any possible type of humour, they show a structural disintegration of both society and the mind. Is everything nothing more than a hallucination? It is possible, but the language leaves no room for doubt that the events are happening as described. The city is recognised by the character as his own, he even finds his street and his apartment. The atmosphere is violent and subversive, and this ending feeds off the beginning in a proportionally inverse way. If at first we think that the character has arrived at the dark and silent room transported from his normal environment, of which he barely remembers a few elements, now we realize, if we accept that he has already returned to "his" reality, that he has left a situation that is not normal but chaotic. So, the place is less absurd and less violent than reality. In the place, life and death were shown in their results, without precipitation or situations that showed conflict or violent desperation. Death as seen in childhood, like when we see that our grandfather has died while we were at school. Anguish and unreason, the outgrowths of life experience, are still there, and take shape as we grow, but each year is like a different room, which progressively deteriorates. In the end, in his supposedly own city, the character realizes that the stranger is him, not the place where he is. Going out and coming back become, then, ambiguous, interchangeable, indefinite concepts.

Sinclair Lewis

Cass Timberlane (1945)

Lewis devoted almost all of his fiction to a systematic, methodical study of average American society. More specifically, he located it in a certain sector of it, the Middle East, an area where tradition and conservatism

maintained a bastion of unmistakable idiosyncrasy identified with the most deep-rooted feelings and moral paradigms that gave rise to the birth of the United States. It is not for nothing that it is one of the centers of greatest purchasing power, coinciding with one of the most important cultural centers, represented by architecture, for example, and I mention this art because it is closely related to the concept of family, of functional socioeconomic unit. Because the true bond, judging by what Lewis shows us, is not mutual feeling but the preservation of a homogeneity that has its internal changes, its continuous bonds and ruptures, like an ordered chaos. There may be hatred between individuals, but they will all unite against a common enemy. And this enemy can be called social class, race, creed, purchasing power and all the other possible ways in which it is possible to find a difference that serves as a justification for an irritation or a discomfort in this social sector. As something that begins as an itching that warns us that there is a strange element, which does not fit in with the rest. And that soon it must be eliminated, or absorbed in such a way that there are no longer differences. Lewis has explored these elements in a very varied way: racism, for example, in *King's Blood*, in a very direct way, also in different fields: medicine in *Arrowsmith*, the academic field in *Gideon Planish*, religious creeds in *Elmer Gantry*, the theater in *Bethel Merryday*. Except for this last novel, minor in my opinion, the rest are a curiously cruel and at the same time delicate study of the shortcomings of society. In their great majority, his novels bear the name and surname of the protagonist as their title, which is still a confirmation of the portraitist and analytical intention, like a clinical history. But we should not find in this author a harsh or grotesque language or treatment. Completely contrary to this, his studies are based on an apparently casual look, like that of a witness, a physiognomist or a portraitist, who is making sketches for a painting. His works are very visual, apparently simple in language, and for this he uses a humor that is almost always naive irony. This type of irony is very difficult to handle, very susceptible to falling into implausibility, especially with the passage of time, which changes the common references to a period and by which these elements can become more understandable and forceful. However, the author's skill has known how to use narrative instruments related to a universal look. and almost timeless, despite the multiple references to time and place, which are precisely essential to give a familiar, spontaneous and direct charm to the approach to these novels. The environments that he uses are familiar: the house, the home, the typical family, the neighbors in the neighborhood. These common elements give an appropriate climate of warmth to the reader, and to this is added the treatment of a naive look, of intelligent humor tinged with a warm irony that is revealed very little by little, as the conflict takes hold. This conflict affects the protagonist in an important way, because it destabilizes him, without physical violence, because here it is the verbal violence subtly veiled by education that predominates. The dialogues, however, have the strange virtue of being sharp and hurtful, condemnatory, but in reserved ways and with an irritating simplicity. The

underlying cruelty of human nature is here covered, as in Balzac, with the cloaks of good manners, and these are the defences that its defenders raise around their cities built on the basis of certain parameters that they are not willing to surrender: race, power, culture. But I insist that Lewis's treatment is characterised by a gaze as politely elegant as what he intends to reveal is intense, and it is thanks to this that it gains in originality and strength. The effectiveness of these novels does not come from the crudeness or horror of reality, but from the cracks that can be seen in the apparently peaceful surfaces of an ordinary, middle-class town.

The novel in question is about a forty-year-old divorced judge who falls in love with a girl half his age. The plot is apparently very simple: how to make this girl fit into his established customs and the social environment to which he belongs. This is another common element in Lewis' characters, the feeling that at a certain moment, for an internal reason or because they come from a different background, they do not fit into established society. The feeling of isolation and continuous wandering from one job to another or from another group is only an external way of manifesting it. The characters must fight not only against the forces that reject them in a civilized cruel way, but also against their own insecurities and desires. The age difference is only one of many differences that separate the judge and his girlfriend, the social class is also important, although slightly different in purchasing power, the work of their parents, the friends they frequent, the ideas they defend, especially in the time in which the conflict takes place, that is, the Second World War and the climax of communism. The girl is reluctantly accepted, while she tries to maintain her defensive attitude without giving in. But she finally does so, because she loves or believes she loves the judge. The plot is long and the vicissitudes that both go through are various, but they can all be summed up in a series of common items: the previous experience of love, the insecurity of youth and the reticence and distrust of maturity, the need to fit in with established customs, the pressure of society. The theme of marital love is a theme that runs through the entire plot in a transcendent way, without being judged or analyzed, because it is not necessary to do so. The behaviors of the protagonists speak for themselves. The interesting thing about the novel arises from two high points: 1) The contrast between the protagonists, the idealistic look of the judge, who despite his maturity retains naivety, and the restless, rebellious and insecure look of the girl. Both confront each other because ultimately both are insecure both of themselves and of the other. Both of them travel in parallel but in different directions: the mature man who feels younger for experiencing a love that he should have felt in his youth, and the inexperienced girl who must live in a short time everything that he has already lived. 2) The intercalation of portraits of people and couples from the town has the objective of giving a more direct, less subjective sample, and therefore a little more free from the limitations that the chosen treatment gives to the grammatical structure. Here the author makes forceful portraits of the double morality of society. Traders, professionals, housewives, all of them hide things, secrets, resentments

and hatreds that manifest themselves in unsustainable attitudes but that are maintained over the years, feeding resentments that sometimes end in tragedies, other times in situations of tremendous psychological and moral cruelty. Lewis's novels revolve around these elements and the result is a bittersweet mix of humor, irony and a suitable dose of nostalgia and idealism, all tempered with good taste and the necessary delicacy, because the surfaces that are meant to be kept whiter are where stains and dirt are most noticeable.

#### Alexander Solzhenitsyn *Cancer Ward* (1967)

First point to bear in mind: Solzhenitsyn is a realist writer. As he himself was careful to emphasize through the words of one of the characters in this novel, the writer of this period must write about his contemporaries. For this reason, this novel is, along with *The First Circle*, a collective novel, where the voices of multiple characters follow one another through the voice of the narrator. But the narrative resources and the technique used never deviate from traditional narration, from an apparent structural simplicity; moreover, they honor this tradition through careful prose and a careful concern for clarity. What is peculiar, then, is not in the effects of the language, which follows the teachings of naturalism but is freed from all technical impurities or unnecessary elements that could hinder reading. As we said, the language is only apparently simple, but it is carefully crafted both in the dialogues, eminently realistic and very believable, and in the descriptions, short, precise, never over-adjectivized, and in the actions, briefly developed. The latter is a key point that demonstrates the effectiveness of the treatment chosen by the author. The entire narrative takes place within an oncology clinic, so it is easy to assume how limited the characters' actions may be, considering also the multiplicity of them, each one fighting to gain prominence in front of the reader. And this also amazes us when each one manages to expose his personality to a greater or lesser extent, but without failing to show his physical and moral wounds accurately before the reader's eyes. The third-person narrator changes from point of view without abrupt transitions, in a curiously simple but very careful way, so that the attentive reader is not startled by the change of character. Despite delving into the personality of each of them, the passage is smooth, almost imperceptible. It is a difficult technique, which perhaps the Russian language accepts more readily than others. Let us think, for example, of Balzac, in his abrupt changes of point of view and atmosphere, sometimes successful, constituting a new discovery in its achievement, a new form of narrative, other times, leaving much to be desired. But Solzhenitsyn succeeds with this procedure, and for this he contributes good taste and a style of eloquent dignity and elegance in the language, simply precise, with the necessary contrasts, emotional contrasts, I mean. Because here the chapter endings are worked in a commendable way, each one

being almost a closed department of the same building, each one occupying a floor, and the reader is in charge of putting together the whole. The characterization of the characters is not lacking in Balzacian depth due to their tragic destinies, and therefore Solzhenitsyn's style, due to his human point of view, is of nineteenth-century characteristics, without this being to the detriment of its relevance. To tell what happens in contemporary times, he uses an established style, effective in telling reality. He can be accused of lacking risk and innovation, but not of excellent results. The style, moreover, responds not only to the nineteenth-century form, but to a Russian style also from the nineteenth century, which the Russians have managed to maintain well into the twentieth century. A style, a tone, perhaps, of legend, of Russian tale, which, if the dichotomy is valid, serves to tell, due to its very flexibility and simplicity, real, bloody, true events. The characters represent positions, as in children's stories, but here the complexity is greater, of course. The characters take positions in the face of various circumstances or ideas. Political events are around, along with medical treatments, some general and others particular, but we know that the general affects the particular, in the end. The individual is the final objective of every political process, and politics involves both social maneuvers and health laws and the culture with which the last inhabitant of the last town will accept or not the healing of his body.

It is very interesting the way in which the characters are confronted, each one representing his idea, not by actions but by description. A way of looking or dressing, a silent or noisy attitude, constitutes not only a personal position but also a political one. The summaries are also another achievement. They are not forced, but rather form part of the plot in a natural, spontaneous way. Past and present are united and confused by means of these summaries that have the rare ability to illuminate the narrative. But these ideological positions are not arbitrary nor are they crudely exposed. Sometimes they are described by the characters, other times by the narrator, but always tinged with ambiguity. For them, there are pairs of contrary meanings, which cancel each other out before dominating. The book is based on a single, arbitrary idea. For example: morality and tradition are represented by two contradictory characters: Kostoglotov and Rasunov, one the deportee who defends ethical morality, the other the political administrator who defends the tradition of political laws to the hilt. But the novel goes even further: it speaks of life and death, it speaks of the comfortable life obtained through corruption or of death as the price for ethical principles. Or also through another similar parallelism, although inverted: what should be according to Rasunov's law, and what the world really is according to Kostoglotov. It also speaks of the medical treatment that the sick are forced to accept, despite its adverse effects. Therefore the question of maintaining life at the expense of what price is raised. Is it ethical for the sick to be forced to accept a treatment even when they are not willing to accept it? Is it something similar to a political tyranny, where evil is done with the intention of good? What are the limits in relation to the life and body of others? The position of the patients and

the doctors is pious, carefully mediated and considered by the author. Doctors as men and women with their limitations, and above all with their doubts, their ability to cure and their impotence in the face of failure. Patients whose exaltation for life and veneration for the doctor clashes with successive failures and the posing of a primordial question: how long to continue fighting.

This novel is a great allegory, or contemporary fable through a neutral and modern style at the same time, about society in general, about the ambiguity of man and about a particular moment in history. In the clinic, positions are represented that have been manifested with slight variations throughout the history of humanity: freedom and repression. The clinic is a small world that represents what happens on a larger level, perhaps universal if we consider that for each person the country to which they belong is the entire universe. This involves the love for what we call our homeland and the feeling for everyday life, for what we love because it represents us. In the things we see ourselves in and identify with, which tell us that we exist. When we lose these everyday things, let's call them land, home or country, through theft or exile, it is as if we were killed. Then the ambivalent couple of life and death comes into play. Our body is our last home, too, the only one we have left when everything has been taken from us. Death, whether from cancer or not, is an exile that no decree will ever be able to refute.

August 1914 (1970)

Solyenitzin's literature is epic. His novels involve an entire set design that is not only that, but a great cinematic painting where multiple characters appear, where the voice of each one of them is translated by the author's accurate pen. Each chapter of this novel takes on practically a different character, whether military or civilian, upper or lower class, merchant, peasant or student, and gets the voice of each one right through an indirect style, in the third person, but which transports us to the environment and the era, and above all to the person to whom it is referring. In a style of language that is accessible but not simple, worked but not complex, it manages to introduce us or bring us, rather, the character together with his era. Thus, in this novel we see characters who have barely been introduced, who disappear for many chapters, to reappear again in the middle of the conflict of others, and the plot is the background where the different characters intersect and show their more or less direct or distant relationships, but which make up a whole, a conglomerate, a system that seems permanently exposed to destruction by and from its own members. The system is the country, the sense of homeland, the sense of belonging, the moral values and the characteristics of the nonsense that politics acquires. Thus, the author's pen alternates between general, epic spaces

and personal, intimate spaces. The emotional is on equal terms with the historical, and the historical, extremely documented, does not overwhelm with its heaviness or rigidity because it is wisely intertwined with the personal and emotional, that is, with the individuals who were the protagonists of these events. Because, after all, war is a question of figures in a history book, but its dead and survivors demand more than a number in the statistics. Their emotions are expressed through authors such as Solzhenitsyn, concerned with contemporary drama, both with feelings and with causes. In this way, the real and historical, told in a novelistic way, becomes fiction, but not to diminish its importance, but to highlight other levels of reality, deeper levels that make us feel and think beyond the limits of reality. The language also uses irony when it speaks of political and military strategies, criticism when it speaks of results and situations, it is cruel when it must be when it tells us the details of the war, it is tender when it tells us about women and children, about young hopeful and idealistic students, it is heroic when it tells us about the actions of regiments decimated by the enemy. The style is a wise balance between all these factors, and so we find fragments where in the middle of a general painting, the author takes the time to give us a detail that depicts a character and his feelings at a given moment: "Oria stood next to the chestnut tree trunk, without touching it; he did not seem to show any desire to relax, to give rest to either his right or left leg. He looked rather with a mocking and kind gesture," or the following one that depicts him in full body: "That Ukrainian who seemed to have come out of a painting, with hard features, thick eyebrows, a big and wide nose, with a city suit that looked like a carnival costume, for his humor and his patriarchal dignity, and more than anything because of the steppe wind that came with him and that made the papers on the table stir...". This is enough to demonstrate the fragile and effective balance between what has already been named, and also to combine the personal characteristics with the scenographic elements that surround the character. As if the men and things that surround him, even temporarily, came together to form a certain personality.

A large part of the novel is occupied by military characters and plots, and the main characters, such as General Samsonov or Colonel Vorotintsev, are the protagonists through whom the author expresses his critical opinions, but they are never moral messages but simple novelistic facts that reach the reader's heart by first passing through the critical filter of his thought. He criticizes the hypocrisy and interests underlying war, the corruption of both officers and soldiers, the way in which regiments are used as guinea pigs, abandoned to their fate after a game that is considered lost. Another example of the balance between the historical and the emotional is given by this paragraph describing a nurse immediately after a brief monologue about the looting carried out by the soldiers: "If it were not for this dirty war, that girl would not have appeared, dressed in such impeccable white with her cap drawn tight to her forehead, right up to her eyebrows, so severe and clean." Finally, we cite the following example, the meditation of

a general in the middle of the enormous forest of Grunfliess, populated by enemies, which sums up an entire intention already realized in the rest of the novel, a brief, epic and intimate moment, like the nature of man: "The stillness was absolute. A complete universal silence, no clash of armies, only the breath of a fresh breeze in the night. The treetops rustled. It was not a hostile forest: it was neither German nor Russian, but God's, and it welcomed all beings into its bosom." If some characters are left out, especially the civilians, it is because this novel is part of an unfinished triptych, the first part dedicated to only 11 days of the war. As in Dos Passos' novels, Solzhenitsyn dedicates chapters to period documents, to cinematographic fragments, but to a much lesser extent than the American author. Solzhenitsyn's interest is documentary and historical, but his story is written on paper impregnated with human scent, touched by hundreds of hands, stained and reread, with marks and signs, traces left by the intimate murmur of a breath, an outburst or a tear. Traces of the human heart.

Norman Mailer

Tough Men Don't Dance (1984) The Naked and the Dead (1948) Harlot's Ghost (1991)

Almost twenty years ago, I read Norman Mailer's *Stories* (1967), coinciding with a period of personal learning in terms of writing. At that time, I found it a pleasant discovery to find this American author with his peculiar way of narrating, a mixture of extreme craftsmanship, a break with conventional linearity and narrative point of view, and a boldness in form and language. I cannot say that it was a very influential impression, since I would have accessed other of his works out of my own curiosity in the following years. What I did like about these stories is what I mentioned before, that curiously hard vision, and above all a commendable narrative craft. Much later, these same virtues seem not to be sufficient to sustain long novels. If the very brevity, not too much, of course, of the stories, highlighted the good craft, in the long texts these virtues are somewhat false, incongruous and weak. Let us clarify the issue. When I began to read *Tough Men Don't Dance*, I thought I was reading a great novel. The first-person narrator's language, disillusioned, failed, the point of view that zigzags between reality and dreams due to his condition as an alcoholic and a writer in decline, make this novel an apparent example of good literature, especially because there are fragments whose moral crudeness and poetic flight try to compete with Faulkner, and at times it seems to succeed without failing. But these moments do not coincide with the whole, because the language, of apparently brutal workmanship, explicitly focused on the sexual and its diverse variations, and the interesting ideas about human nature and



destiny, are lost in a conventional plot, both because of its triteness and its lack of depth. The writer who has fallen on hard times, wrapped up in a plot where he must decide if he is the author, where, in short, memory and its games participate in an important way, are extremely interesting elements. But the ending is disappointing and the plot comes close to being melodramatic and ridiculous. The grotesque and the black humour are lost in a meaningless plot, which does not even leave the reader the continuous pleasure of good language. Something similar happens with *The Naked and the Dead*, but other problems are added. Although here the plot cannot be described as trivial, since it relates the author's own fictional experiences in the Second World War, if we compare it with other novels of similar experiences and initiation - such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, *Three Two-Step Soldiers* or Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* - with which it also shares a common interest in breaking the inherited mould of the narrative of the last century, it loses due to a treatment that is too cold. The problem is not this coldness in itself, nor even the crudeness, but the monotony of the language, the lack of contrasts, the flat result of a language that tends to be long but with not very extensive ideas, and that precisely for that reason is easily exhausted, leaving only a monotonous and meaningless echo in the reader's memory. In *Harlot's Ghost*, we have a promising start, a first chapter that plays as an introduction with poetic overtones, where repetition, although not explicit, creates a music that leads both to nostalgia for an ideal environment and place, and for a mystery to be revealed. An interesting mix that is lost in the following chapters, where the attempt to explore the psychology and morality of a CIA agent is practically absent, to the point of the language becoming saturating and overwhelming, not because of the wealth of ideas but because of its total lack of subtlety and harmony. It is true that a successful language can be built very well with crude elements and a break from what is considered elegant and harmonious, and Mailer has been an active executor of these forms. But the instruments he uses remain, as in *Tough Men Don't Dance*, in the mere situation of instruments. They do not appeal to the reader or to his own imagination, they project long scenes like extensive preambles that do not lead to anything concrete. If the intention was to create a novel that describes the desolate condition of the average American soul, as if it were a wasteland of its own austerity, the language should be austere but deep in its connotations, as Hemingway well knew, or rich in moral or social ideas, like *Two Steps* or Steinbeck. But Mailer tends to write a lot, and he tries to achieve the climax of a Faulkner without being able to even come close to it. The language is, then, monotonous, boring at times to the point of exasperation, to the point of wanting to skip pages, a sin if there ever was one for a reader who takes himself seriously, and terribly lacking in psychological depth. The audacity of the language in terms of its explicit crudeness does not replace the inadequacy of the final result, nor the good literary moments where one tries to explore the soul of man. Mailer is a writer usually associated with the virile, with the masculine, his characters are almost always men, and it is curious that his exploration does not go

beyond a brutality of ironic and grotesque edges. Even this look would be interesting and valid if it were not for the problem of language that we already mentioned. A flat language that does not dig deep or ascend the steps of the poetic. It is true that these comments are made based on a minimal part of his vast work, however they represent both his initial period and the later, or mature, if it is correct to speak in that way.

## EXISTENTIALISM THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

“La pensée d'un homme est avant tout sa nostalgie.”

Albert Camus

German Rozenmacher

### Complete Stories

This 1971 edition recovers, shortly after his death, the only two books of stories by the author, plus two stories published in anthologies, and one unpublished. *Cabecita negra*, from 1962, was published when he was 26 years old, and contains 6 stories. From the first story we find a defined, deliberate style, a sincere and carefully chosen stylistic imprint.

Rozenmacher was a writer that we could place or pigeonhole within the social. His stories are not fantastic, his fictions do not tolerate argumentative ambiguities. His stories speak of a social reality that, however, does not point to the sociological or to the study of customs, nor to socioeconomic politics. All this only forms a scenario, a background where the characters of the stories move, but which at the same time are the product and result of a symbiosis between characters and society. The point of view is always centered on the development of the protagonists, on the human element, but not as a generality but as a particularity.

Rozenmacher's characters are ordinary beings, men and women with routine lives of little interest, where economic failure is only comparable to their emotional and even moral failure. The city and society have played their part in this, but they seem to be victims of their own self-deceptions, their vacillations and lack of strength. If we talk about *Sadness in the Hotel Room*, the characters in this story are archetypal of what we are trying to highlight. A lonely middle-aged man and woman who meet and temporarily

console each other, both aware of the same fatuity, the same irrelevance and transience of their contact. A slight hope, arising from such consolation, from such shared time, seems to be born and satisfy them, even though they are aware that it may soon collapse. In the other stories in this first book, among which *The Golden Cat* stands out, we have a series of variations within the range of the social. The aforementioned story is a kind of allegory or urban fable with a high emotional content, slightly reminiscent of the stories of Schultz or Buzzatti. *Cabecita negra* and *Raíces* are stories where the social aspect predominates, with more stereotyped and structured characters in the first case. But *Raíces* contains a more elaborate structure, where changes in time and place function as passages and passageways where memories or flashbacks shape a life while a present situation develops, which has its outcome, whose strength lies in all the previous stories. The style chosen by Rozenmacher to show us all this is based on narrative fluidity, on the breaking of grammatical conventions. Punctuation marks are scarce, the narrative voice mixes and merges with the voice of the characters. The erudite style merges with the colloquial style without precise changes, without disturbing or being shocking, because the rhythm is enveloping. The reader is immediately involved in a verbal climate that gives plausibility to the plot setting. In reality, the place is almost a result of the language used rather than a product of a precise or detailed description. In this first book, however, a certain immaturity is noticeable, but this is only perceived when compared to the second.

*The Eyes of the Tiger*, from 1968, published when he was 32, has an even more social content in relation to the first. This characteristic was noticeable in the style, in the language, but the plots were more in function of the characters, as if they were the axis around which the rest of each story was built. In the second book, the characters have gained psychological depth and the language is more challenging in terms of the reader's ability to follow the plot threads, simple but entangled by these changes of time and place, which are nothing more than another way of practicing the Proustian style. To this structure or resource, we also add the Faulknerian teachings of Greek tragedy within contemporary contexts. Thus we obtain a narrative poetry that emerges from the language itself to transmit characters and stories to us in an indirect way. *Blues in the Night* is a shocking story in terms of the implications of the social on the urban individual. Loneliness, failure, dreams and broken hopes make it comparable to *Sadness in the Hotel Room*. The other stories in this second book have as protagonists characters who are more active in political life. We enter the marginal areas of beings dedicated to revolutionary and violent activity, but the political background is simply a setting, and what stands out is the masterful development of the characters. Rozenmacher has managed to achieve the exact balance to show them. It does not matter if what they do is right or wrong, if their attitude is moral or immoral. He shows them as human beings stuck in a given situation that they must resolve based on a whole process of change. The author tells us a story

little by little, so that the reader gets to know and identify with the character. Not really identify with him, but become familiar with him, to the point of feeling that he has met him, and regrets his death, whatever the way it may be. The endings of all the stories may be tragic and open in many cases, but in all there is a naturalness and a strict logic. The quality of the stories is not only in the narrative skill, nor even in the psychological depth or the tragic implications, but in the natural development of the stories, in that carefully crafted simplicity that tells us that these characters and their stories cannot have any other end than the one shown to us.

Gene Wolfe

### Endangered Species (1989)

Thirty-four stories spanning seventeen years, published in various anthologies and magazines, and compiled for this edition under the generic name *Endangered Species*. What are the endangered species? We ask ourselves. In these stories, various creatures appear that are not necessarily fantastic figures, such as unicorns or minotaurs, the protagonists of some of them. The endangered species is also the human species, because in many of these stories the main characters are robots or more precisely androids, whose main peculiarity is not so much their electronic physical structure, but rather their capacity for thought and feeling, making them similar to a human being of flesh and blood. We then ask ourselves, where are the men and women, and we find that their presence is not only scarce but poor and sad. One of the most successful stories, where this is perfectly conveyed is *The HOMOLs of the war*, where a soldier of the android army considers himself a human infiltrator to investigate, and yet the great final doubt, both of the reader and his own, is whether he really is a human or an android that has been implanted with a human memory. Wolfe's science fiction stories do not tire or overwhelm the reader with technical data, and even these are subtly implanted in the story, they are part of the setting in a natural and logical way. The author's language does not focus on finding plausible explanations or giving justifications, only on letting the human element unfold, even when there are no flesh-and-blood men as protagonists. This element is represented by the interpersonal relationships between the characters, but above all the ethical conscience that underlies the end of each story as a subliminal, implicit, obligatory but never moralizing message. The surprising thing about these stories is that after developing as adventure stories, well told and in exquisite good taste, with a high-quality poetics, they reveal a residue of philosophical thought, a mundane but profound approach to

man, his behavior and his nature. The origin and destiny of man as an instrument and end in himself, his function in the history of the universe. There are also many horror stories, fantastic and futuristic ones, and current and contemporary ones. They all have in common, in addition to the appropriate and careful language of a great literary aesthete, a search that goes beyond the story itself. These stories, like all anecdotes, are only forms or instruments to tell something that underlies the inherent interest of every human being: love, the nature of the normal, the nature of the monstrous, the search for divinity, destiny and the purpose of life. I must insist on the literary quality of these stories, the curiously original way of structuring the plots, conventional and at the same time different. The narrators' voices are generally in the third person, but the author has managed to amalgamate his voice with the point of view and the voice of the main character in question, so that they seem to be narrated from a first person, which in turn alternates with the voice of other simultaneous ones. It is a characteristic of Wolfe to convey this diversity of life, this simultaneity without confusing the reader: the variety of time, its lack of chronology, changes of scene, but above all of voices. Sometimes, the psychological capacity of certain characters justifies this simultaneity of voices that do not speak but are expressed in actions that are in turn pure thought, and here a whole existentialist philosophy can be included: life, thought and action are one and the same thing, not substitutes but simultaneous. Voice and thought are being and existing, beyond the limitations of time and space.

Science fiction and futurism serve to speak of these themes because they provide a concrete scenario, a methodology applied to these abstract ideas, and Wolfe's skill has been able to express this diversity in an exclusive way, this being one of his main contributions to fiction literature. The stories in this book, short or long like short novels, possess the rare virtue of a wonderful imagination and literary excellence.

Paz (1975)

This novel by Gene Wolfe reminds us, at first, of Ray Bradbury's *The Wine of Summer*. The poetic tone is in keeping with childhood memories, the narrator's voice is nostalgic, a narrator who is the protagonist and witness of the events he is telling us about. An adult man, perhaps dead, who tells us about the episodes of his life, important moments not only for their dramatic significance, but also those that, due to their simplicity, are tinged with an emotion that endures over time and survives oblivion. But later on we find in this novel its own traits that denote a particular style, a special, different narrative voice. If in Bradbury nostalgia predominates, shrouded in a mist wisely created by ambiguity and mystery, where the strange is even more disturbing because of the familiar and everyday

environment, in Paz we find more incongruous elements, secondary stories that have their own imprint of strangeness bordering on horror. There are no half measures in this novel by Wolfe, but good taste is the predominant style. The ambiguity is not in the facts themselves, since both the author and the reader are not surprised that the fantastic is treated as something natural, but in the treatment with which they are narrated. Something strange is something out of the ordinary, but the author asks us what is ordinary. To this curious symbiosis created by the language is added the structure chosen for the novel. The themes are varied, the plot lines are scattered, the times are mixed and confused without disorienting the reader, because what is important is not the temporal chronology of the events but the sensation of accumulation, of passages, similar to what each one experiences on his path through life. Life is not an uninterrupted and exact succession of times and spaces, but a constant mixture, and this is what Wolfe proposes to us, and which he has managed to convey masterfully. The five chapters could be read as independent stories, but if we did so something would be missing, a common axis that is life in the end, that bond that unites apparently disjointed episodes, periods that form or constitute the life of each man and that seen separately seem to be part of many different men.

Paz is not a fantasy novel, but it does include the strange, that which has no logical explanation yet. Paz, too, is a fantasy novel, but it does not discard everyday feelings, the passions of common and ordinary characters. It includes fears, deaths, thwarted loves, illness. Childhood, adulthood and old age. The ending is open, inconclusive, death does not necessarily occur at the end, but can be told from the beginning. With it, memory can also begin, and therefore, the story of life, like one more story or episode among many others. Dispersion, Wolfe tells us, is a synonym for that common thing, perhaps the only common thing, that we call life. A spinster aunt with three suitors, who when she finally gets married, dies very young. The search for a treasure hidden by a pirate. A pharmacist who believes he is being murdered by a ghost. These stories have the peculiarity of being both true and fantastic, and Wolfe hints, suggests to us that the fantastic can be real and the real fantastic. Childhood is, perhaps, the key element to grasp this idea. The open mind of a child, whose credulity is the open door to a universe that adults do not dare to explore. We close doors when what we sense causes us fear, but the child has not yet built doors, and both horror and pleasure are combined and form a personality.

Life, after childhood, as the author tells us in this novel, is nothing more than a repetition of memories, of recollections, of searches for that primordial sensation: fear and pleasure united. Two poles combined from time to time, creating chasms and mountains, swings, imbalances and balances. Paz is a fable, a sum of fables, an allegory and a true story, all at the same time. The language and the narrative structure are wisely managed to achieve that strange balance: dispersion and convergence,

succession and simultaneity. The limits erased, the contours exchanged. As a good storyteller should do.

Hugo Mujica

Complete Poetry (1983-2004)

Hugo Mujica's poetry never contains a light or superficial poetics. In his poems we find a gaze that is never less than profound, concerned about the transcendence of man, and restless about the path and destiny of what we call the soul. His poetry can speak to us about everyday things, about the objects of our daily life. These are the ethos we live with every day, but sometimes these instruments of everyday order are allegories, other times they are simple examples with which the author wants to convey a concern, a question. His questions are, in most cases, questions without a definitive answer. Each of his poems is a unique and at the same time cumulative attempt to understand the problems of man related to his existence and destiny, about the soul and the body, about love and happiness, about pain, anguish, despair, disillusionment, ecstasy or identification. All his books of poems follow the same paths, without repeating themselves. The tone is similar, the themes similar, but each visit to the same gardens are so many revisitations, reactualizations, which become deeper as the language is transformed. If in the first books, such as *Brasa blanca*, *Sonata de violoncelo y lilas* the language is more concise, more enumerative and descriptive in an extremely brief way, almost hermetic in certain parts, in the following ones, such as *Escrito en un reflejo*, and above all in *Para alberguer una ausencia* and *Noche abierta*, the grammatical structure and the verses are longer, the logic that links them more explicit. But this does not mean that they lose intensity, on the contrary. By becoming clearer, the philosophy implicit in the verses, that is, the mystical and transcendent content, regains the force that shorter or brief poems could take away from it in terms of clarification and power. Although in literature less is more, Mujica's apparently simple verses never go beyond a certain extension previously arranged by the same content they contain. How to express God other than by saying, as in the poem *Hasta el final*: "the innocent.../the one who asks forgiveness for all other people's crimes:/the one who forgives God."

Mujica's poetry is, in essence, a work of antithesis. This antithesis plays with the meaning of words that are apparently opposed, but whose meanings are ambivalent depending on the context, and especially if we clean them of all the costumbrismo or colloquial filth that tends to distort their origin. Contrasting things can coexist, without conflict, without cancelling each other out, but the most important thing, and here is the

original and profound thing about an entire conception of the world as transcendent poetic thought, is that contrasting meanings can be interchanged, they can also contain within themselves the opposite of what they express. Examples: word/silence, light/blind, burn/thirst, red/white. Many more could be mentioned, but these are enough to demonstrate the simultaneous states in which these words coexist. A mirror can also be a cage, or the iris of an eye. The word always, interchangeable or re-signified by the word now, is contrasted with never. In both cases we see how the supposed contradictions are dissolved and the reader's mind gradually accepts this symbiosis, a state that is suitable for accepting the ambivalence of the world, for leaving aside the exasperating superficiality of trivial things, where time is a destructive machine of lives, and for immersing ourselves in a plane where time and space are less important than sensations. To do this, Mujica has nothing but common, simple, austere words, and he knows how to extract all the possible value from them. He explores them, thinks about them carefully, places them in his poems in a way that they acquire a new meaning. Not a new one, surely, but one that is redefined by the silence that the poet seeks in those words.

Mujica's poems are very suitable for reading aloud. The pauses, the silences, the meaning of the words and the verses that must be thought about before moving on to the next paragraph, are appropriate for a reader who must never exaggerate his expressions. If one reads them in silence, the spiritual and human concatenations form a sensation that moves one by its very simplicity. They are poems where thought fulfills an emotional function, where darkness alternates with hope, where faith is a virtue that must be constantly put to the test if it does not wish to become stagnant and lose all value. Doubt, and the pain of that doubt, is what feeds this type of poetry. Thinking is another form of emotion for those who know how to read in the intense silences of poetic language.

A note regarding Mujica's short narrative. Empty Paradise, poetic prose, the stories in Solemne y mesurado, or the prose poems in Flecha en la niebla, do not share, in my opinion, the achievements of his short poetry. We find the same search and the same concerns, but the language becomes regrettably repetitive, too abstract. This abstraction, necessary for certain themes of human transcendence, tends to lose the reader's attention when the forms in which the poems are written are not the same. The narrative language that we try to express them is too extensive. Narrative language, in the case of stories, must include not only the fable or the allegory, but also an active force that draws the reader's attention. This force can be an everyday or familiar element, a well-defined character, a fact that bursts in from the first sentence, an ending where ambiguity is born from the very irrefutability of that ending. This does not happen with Mujica's narrative. When it comes to his prose poems, where the search or mystical concern borders on teaching or moralizing, rhetoric undermines the efforts and trivializes the result. The case is different when the essay is specifically a



study elaborated with the traditional rules of prose. When intentionality predominates in poetry, it is precisely poetry that loses.

John Keats

### The Poetry of the Earth

How can I comment on Keats, bearing in mind, as one should always bear in mind when reading or speaking about Keats, the wonderful essay on his life and work written by Julio Cortázar. But the following words have no other purpose than to make a brief reference and to give a few superficial impressions about the edition and about the poetry in general of this great English poet. The Poetry of the Earth is a compilation of some of Keats's sonnets and odes, translated and selected by Ana Bravo and Javier Adúriz. It must be said that the selected texts are undoubtedly the best and the translation is an enviable achievement. Having established this, it remains for us to comment on the selected poems. The title of the compilation is taken from the first verse of the poem To the Grasshopper and the Cricket, a sonnet that clearly represents the structural and thematic tendency of Keats's general work. His sonnets, grammatically, tend to confront and compare two or more different situations or objects, located with the simple scheme 1-2 / 3-4. In this way, the brief enumeration of the thematic object with its virtues or defects is compared with that of a third object, generally deeper, philosophical or humanistic in general, thus achieving, with this modality of verses and paired themes, a kind of poetic theorem. This quasi-mathematical approach is another way of schematizing and organizing poetic impressions so that they are clearer both for the author and the reader. Let us not forget that Keats comes from a century rich in intellectual development, both humanistic and scientific, and mathematics represented the advance as the virtual technology in our contemporary era. This does not take away sensitivity from the poems, but rather a clearer way of approaching individual feeling, a kind of sentimental and philosophical analysis that could easily be called a school of twentieth-century psychologism. For what is Freud's psychoanalytic theory but a creation that emerged from the most closed realms of the imagination, where the hidden takes shape and is channeled along paths that science and its methods inseminate into the mental structure of man, from consciousness to the unconscious and in reverse, successively and without interruption.

Keats speaks with ruthless lucidity about nature and its relationship with man, through poems that are parables in the form of intellectual poems. There is no sentimentality, no matter how much the era that surrounded Keats or a superficial reading wants to see superfluities where there is a

subtle, delicate and at the same time accurate look at the human condition. Keats' poems possess a bitterness born from the contemplation of the brevity and futility of life, but this bitterness does not fall into a paralyzing pessimism, but is based on a positivist pride, a haughty pride in life. In the poem *Why I laughed* we find in the third paragraph: "this very night I might cease to be, see tatters on the flags of the world." This terrible verse is moving because of the irreversible and true nature of its meaning, however it tells us that this anguish is not that of man alone, but of humanity. A pain is not so much if it is shared, even, as it is said in the last verse of this same poem: "death is more intense, the greatest prize of life." Is death a prize? If we think about the positive meaning implied by the word prize, perhaps death is not a punishment but a reward. Then, black becomes white, and sadness becomes hopeful. Keats' Odes are characterized because they speak to us, among other things, of the dichotomy of time and immortality. In few poems we are told of this in a clearer and more moving way than in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, where just by looking at some dead figures sculpted in a vase, we see that they are not so dead, but that they revive and survive time. They are immortal. Other odes, such as *Ode to the Nightingale*, *Ode to Melancholy*, *Ode to Psyche*, are not so. These poems are not songs at all, but philosophical reflections where theories and thoughts merge with the description and praise of the object that inspired the ode. Here the thematic object and the reflections are amalgamated in a way that the reader feels involved in this kind of lyrical systematization.

Rereading these poems by Keats is like reading the figures of the ancient urn that once inspired him. Verses written almost two centuries ago not only take us back to the past, but also tell us with a ruthless beauty not devoid of lyricism that the real concerns of man are always the same, and the search for answers renews the questions, as long as they are asked with the highest tools of poetry and knowledge.

Albert Camus

*Exile and the Kingdom* (1957)

If the common setting for D. H. Lawrence is the English countryside, for Ricardo Güiraldes the pampas, or for Doris Lessing the London suburbs, for Camus it is the desert of Algiers. These settings, more than a suitable setting for the stories, represent a symbol within them, and are a kind of alter ego, a leitmotif, an allegory of the world that all these authors try to capture in their works. In Camus's stories, the desert, the protagonist of most of the stories, is a background setting where the characters live or are passing through, but whatever the case, they feel trapped, fascinated and liberated at the same time. The desert, with its apparent nothingness,

its ruthless stripping and its terrible demand for both solitude and survival, is a symbol of life, even of life beyond death. The protagonists of these stories by Camus are in a situation of failure in their individual life projects, but they find a momentary compensation, a fleeting happiness that only confirms their failure, and which nevertheless constitutes a kind of personal atonement. In *The Adulterous Woman* we have a mature wife without children resigned to a marriage that neither satisfies nor displeases her, but in the desert that she visits with her husband she finds something more, something that could have been, and the desert becomes almost a lover with whom she makes love one last night, an experience that she cannot communicate to anyone else, because it is incommunicable and intimate. *The Renegade* takes place in bygone times, and is a first-person account of a slave who narrates his vicissitudes between obedience and rebellion towards orders established by religious and government institutions. Torture, betrayal and human denigration are the common factors in this story where the intimate is wisely articulated with the historical, giving an adequate image of a dissatisfied and tortured soul. In *The Mutes* we return to the contemporary, with a factory worker who has gone on an unsuccessful strike and must return to work with the failure on his back. It is the most clearly social story of the whole set, but the anecdote is not limited to the moral or social criticism, but articulates different levels: poverty, exploitation, the life and death of a girl, all of this interacting on the two social levels that make up the poles of contemporary society: poverty and wealth, linked by factors that are beyond their control: illness and death. In *The Guest* we have a school teacher in the middle of the desert, who must hand over a rebel. He is not satisfied, he is not a betrayer, even though his people and his laws force him to do so. He despises the rebel for being a murderer, yet he decides to give him freedom, but the other chooses to hand himself over. In return, the rebel's friends will come to take revenge on the betrayer. The master, then, is a victim of his own ideals as he is a victim of the laws of the desert and its inhabitants. *Jonah or the Artist at Work* is a splendid and terrible long story that tells us about the vicissitudes of a painter facing momentary success and the problems of his economic and personal survival. Here the author poses the difficult issue of whether the personal world, love and family, can be obstacles to a life dedicated to art. The painter fades away, not only is he no longer so successful but he paints very sporadically as his social and family life absorb his time and attention. The final scene, where the protagonist finds a kind of climax to his life, painting what should be his best painting, is a pessimistic but noble and profound representation, art as solitude, art as synthesis: the blank canvas (or the blank page) to express everything, even nothing. *The growing stone* takes us to the Brazilian jungle, but here the symbolism of the landscape fulfills the same function as the desert. A hired engineer witnesses the rites of the natives, and in these rites he finds an atonement for his own soul. The confrontation of the supposed High culture and knowledge with the apparent primitivism of indigenous religious rites is the subject in question. One of the men of the

village has promised Jesus, an icon imported by the missionaries, to carry a huge stone on his head during a pilgrimage. Having half succeeded, and seeing that sacrifice, the engineer decides to carry that stone. At the same time, there is almost a fantastic background in the story. The stone, which grows again when it is broken, according to the beliefs of that town, this time is reduced to ashes after being transported by this man who has made the sacrifice.

These stories by Camus have a more poetic tone than those we can find in his early period, for example in *The Stranger*. The intention is still symbolist, but the tone abandons the tendency towards contemporary Kafkaesque fable and approaches pure literary storytelling. The variety of resources and voices is also greater, not structurally, but with subtle handling of language: poetry, dialogues, narrative voices, settings. As a sublime narrator, Camus creates climates more than stories, because in these climates stories emerge spontaneously, like plants in a landscape, forming a picture where objects and men tell stories almost without speaking, and by the same virtue of silence, they are deep, important, transcendent.

### *The Stranger* (1949)

At 37 years of age, Camus published his first novel: *L'étranger*, a key novel in literature in general and in particular of the 20th century. Because the title does not refer to a geographical condition, nor does it speak of exiles or immigrants. Here the dislocation is represented by isolation, foreignness, or perhaps the strangeness of the very condition of the human. To do this, Camus uses a kind of parable, because it is not possible to speak of allegory here. But in this case the parable is not moralizing, but purely demonstrative and instructive, using all the necessary crudeness, and moving with all the edge of that crudeness. Our protagonist is a man who sees his life and the actions of his life pass by with a kind of coldness or indifference that is rarely modified or altered. Extreme acts are necessary for this to happen, and even so, his position is more that of a witness than that of a protagonist. He thinks more than he suffers, and his thoughts are not even too complex, only moderate in tone, with a certain implicit bitterness, and resignation as a desperate instrument for survival. His mother dies in an asylum, and he cannot cry. He has a lover and does not know whether or not he is in love with her, marrying or not marrying is the same for him. The troubles of his neighbors interest him but they slip through his conscience. When a friend asks him for favors that are beyond ethics, he does them because he sees no inconvenience in doing or not doing such a thing. The world does not seem to matter to him, but it is not detachment, but a habit: the habit of a man accustomed to the irremediability of existence. What is existence? Camus seems to ask us

through his character. Man is an isolated being, who only has occasional and superficial contacts with others, even his own actions seem to be whims of a nature alien to ourselves, so we wonder who or what we really are. A man, the protagonist, kills another man for whom he feels neither love nor hate, he simply does it because the circumstance pushed him to do it, be it the intense afternoon sun, the reflection of the light on the opponent's knife or just an action that we do not know what caused it. We are only aware that it was us, that is, our body that did it, and our mind is a witness through our senses. Then come the consequences of the act, because we live in a society armed with arbitrary structures and laws that cannot be overthrown without obvious harm and punishment. What is a sin? the author asks himself and asks us. The protagonist is sentenced to death, and this conclusion is reached not so much for having coldly taken his life but rather for the coldness with which he watched over and buried his mother. Is one act a consequence of another? Should we pay something through another debt? Are we guilty just for existing? Does feeling emotions and regrets represent us more as humans than not doing so? What defines us as humans? A man is a stranger everywhere, some more than others feel at some point isolated, different, strange in the midst of a society made up of many other strangers.

The end of the novel presents us with a new twist, a new redefinition, a kind of conscience: the idea that others define us, that we are the clay with which others form us with their thoughts and words, granting us a meaning, a final substance. The love of others defines us and grants us a certain value, and if it is not love, then hate also has the capacity to fulfill the same purpose. One last note: like Kafka, Camus interprets the human condition, giving us a pessimistic, bitter vision of the isolation and unreason of life. But while in Kafka the absurd is based on the impressions and symbolism that the world creates in the mind, Camus makes an expressionist reinterpretation of the world: the absurdity of existence is represented in the lack of logic of institutions, laws and society in general. Human behavior is shown in actions, not in impressions of dreamlike or symbolic interpretation. Both, however, are not two sides of the same coin, but rather two parallel paths, related, united, as if they had seen each other up close on a couple of occasions, recognizing each other and giving each other a knowing glance and wink, and disillusioned by everything except their own cause and objective.

Germán Arciniegas

Genio y figura de Jorge Isaacs (1967) Entre el Mar Rojo y el Mar Muerto (1963)

The first is an essay that is part of the collection *Genio y figura*, with which EUDEBA paid homage to various Latin American authors through other important essayists and/or writers. In this case, the Colombian writer achieves a very pleasant and accurate approach to the personality and work of Jorge Isaacs. In the first chapter we are presented with a brief biography divided by years, but what is usually a chronological enumeration by dates Arciniegas has made the most of by making a summary where brief quotes from the portrayed author or his contemporaries are included. Here the facts of Isaacs' extra-literary life predominate, which constitute almost a longer and more interesting novel due to its abrupt changes than his own literary work. The economic problems, the family bankruptcies, the failures in the companies he undertook, the vicissitudes of his political performance, are exposed in a brief but very precise way for the reader not initiated in Isaacs' life. The second chapter is a more extensive biography of the political and social performance in the revolutionary scene of the 19th century Colombia and Latin America, where literary activity remained in the background, despite the resounding success of his only novel: *María*. Isaacs' multiple activities could be summarized in two very different planes: one external, dedicated to social and political concerns, including his businesses and various companies that ended in failure; the other, intimate, where literature was a form of expression of the most private feelings, or perhaps the most idealistic way in which Isaacs saw or wanted to see the world. That world that the muscular strength of his spirit tried to transform as a private struggle. The following chapters are dedicated to commenting on the novel, its probable correlations with Isaacs' real life: his childhood and youth at the El Paraíso ranch, his readings, the woman who inspired the plot (José Asunción Silva's sister), also the romantic style inherited from Europe, the influences of Saint-Pierre and Chateaubriand, the romantic school in America, and its successor, the realist, with which it is curiously related, despite being an almost idyllic novel. Here the landscape fulfills the function of symbol and setting at the same time. In *María* not much happens, the anecdote is brief and sad, but what matters are the impressions, and the landscape described in the first person is, perhaps, what enhances the language the most. We dare to make an association that Arciniegas does not mention: this aspect of the novel could be related to some of Güiraldes' works, where the landscape also has a symbolic function, although the language is cruder. Another important aspect is the influence of Poe in certain symbolisms, such as that of the black bird that appears mentioned five times throughout the novel. The last chapter of the essay is dedicated to comments and judgments of various literary authorities from Latin America on Isaacs and his work, among which Enrique Anderson Imbert stands out, the best in my opinion, Arturo Torres Riosco (Chilean), and the Uruguayan Alberto Zum Felde. In short, this approach to Isaacs does nothing but reaffirm the essayistic skill, the literary quality and the good taste of a writer like Arciniegas, who has put in just balance the entertaining with the academic, the literary with

everyday life, personal opinions with the most discreet and accurate literary judgments. Arciniegas brings us an image of Isaacs that is both lyrical and real, certainly limited but comprehensive at the same time, and because it is comprehensive, not imprecise but accurate and detailed in the most important aspects. A brief essay that leaves much to be learned, both about Isaacs' work and about the way in which an excellent essay should be written, which does not need to be long to be excellent.

The second book, *Between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea*, is a consequence of Arciniegas' visit and stay as Colombian ambassador to Israel. As always, the author's narrative and literary skill overcome the obstacles of a task such as the one undertaken: not to write a travel story but to express impressions and ideas about a region, a country and a group of people whose common characteristic is not only the Jewish religion, but also the same need and the same force. It is true that this book was written when Israel was at its peak as an example of an outstanding force capable of transforming the desert into an orchard, both thanks to its own will and to the available technologies. Arciniegas' position is clearly partial in his admiration, but the result is not ideologically overwhelming, but rather tells and describes with evident admiration, but without putting exaggerated emphasis or unnecessary adjectives. Arciniegas' style is of apparent simplicity, of a partiality attenuated by the desire to create literature, that is, to show from one's own point of view, which in this case is that of someone sensitive, educated and balanced in his position. The praise of Israel and its leaders does not bother because it tends to show them as individuals with virtues and weaknesses, in images whose brief length is sufficient to clearly demarcate them. The objective is not to develop long studies on their personalities, nor on the history of Israel or the current conduct of the country with respect to foreign policy. There are indications, mentions on all these subjects, but the best of these texts is in the reality treated as a positive fact, the achievements that have surpassed the errors. What is highlighted here is the strength of a belief, not belonging only to a religion or a race, but to the will to overcome despite multiple and tragic outcomes over a long period of time. Persecution, prejudice, holocaust: a triad of factors common throughout the centuries. This book rescues the moral value of an area of the world and of the men and women who have decided to populate it despite the environmental and political difficulties, which are added to the many already suffered. The objective is not to proclaim its virtues above the rest of humanity, only to exalt what should be exalted out of admiration. The errors that the Israelites may have committed in their ancient or recent past do not rule out the strength and capacity of their survival, whether this is based on racial pride or an ego that is perhaps excessive, on laws that are too rigorous or on an ideological position as rigid as that of their adversaries. Because Israel's position is based as much on its long and proud racial past as on its war crimes and the political interests that govern it. What Arciniegas highlights and constitutes the fresh landscape of this book is the Jewish as poetry, the poetics of an exalted, brave and passionate humanity,

tough like any temperament that has suffered and needs to survive at all costs. This is a book written by someone who has lived with the population of Israel, known the founding leaders and witnessed a growth that goes beyond admiration. Witnessing the birth of a country is not an everyday privilege. What we have learned in history books is almost a legend, a story or a novel. But living it in the 20th century is a strange and exceptional privilege. There are those who will not agree, others will say that it is a superfluous analysis. Arciniegas has achieved what he probably set out to do: to show the signs of a history in the living present of a country and its inhabitants.

Miguel Delibes

Lorenzo's Diaries (1955-1995)

Lorenzo's Diaries is a trilogy made up of the following novels: *Diary of a Hunter*, from 1955, *Diary of an Emigrant*, from 1958, and *Diary of a Retiree*, from 1995. According to the author himself, it did not begin as a specific plan, but rather as a result of the acceptance and success of the first, the idea and the need to continue Lorenzo's story arose. Despite this, and even despite the distance between the first two and the third, the character's tone remains perfectly maintained, both in his way of speaking and in his thoughts and philosophy. One can also see a growth and a maturation in accordance with the different stages of life, and which coincides, as is to be expected in a writer where literature is not only fiction but a tentatively faithful reflection of reality, with the author's own chronological stages. The main characteristic of these diaries is that they are written in this literary genre: written diaries not necessarily every day, not reflecting facts or thoughts with any accuracy or detail. They are only impressions and stories, anecdotes, which together constitute a life not told but related in an entertaining and simple way, without any pedagogical or reflective intention, but only as someone who takes up the events of the day when going to bed, and transfers these thoughts to paper instead of letting them escape into the darkness of sleep. The resource can very well be described as arbitrary, if we consider that the protagonist is not a scholar or a man of great capacity for reflection. Why, we ask ourselves, does a simple villager, with the basic notions of education, decide to write a diary? If it were the memories of a mature and formed man, it would be more understandable. But overlooking this, the result is not disturbing. Delibes' colloquial and simple tone has its charm on the reader. Humour wisely alternates with nostalgia and the painting of the landscape or the characters of the town. Here, then, comes one of the key points of the novel. The narrator is a hunter, but the plot does not refer exclusively to



the subject of hunting, it is almost actually a background theme, a plot setting that serves as a contrast to the ordinary daily life of the young man who narrates his growth, his learning and his first love. The art of hunting is expressed in a conventional way, it is made clear that poaching is against, and the tendency is to consider hunting as a sport where what counts is competition. Of course, there are reasons that the reader can give with good reason against this, from ethical to ecological. In the novel it is made clear that the prey can defend itself, can escape, and this is part of the interest that the activity exerts for the hunter. But these reflections are extra-literary, they do not tarnish the result nor are they implicit in the objective of the work. They are secondary effects that the author must have undoubtedly planned, without caring too much about the consequences, worrying instead about exercising literature above all else. To do this, he created a character, and all opinions pass through his thoughts. These opinions are simple, the result of an experimental examination of life, a mixture of emotion rather than caution, a mixture of paternalistic and sexist teaching, but tender at the same time.

As in other novels by Delibes, the events are common, and sometimes trivial, giving the impression that nothing relevant happens. Picturesque characters, anecdotes of daily life, economic and work problems, sentimental affections. In the midst of all this, death arises from time to time, a fact that is accepted almost with a cold resignation due to the chosen tone. Nostalgia and sadness are adequately dosed, and in this novel in particular, they contrast with the fact of hunting. Death, then, arises as a milestone that determines steps in life, but also as points of reflection for the reader, leading him to the following questions or dichotomies: man hunts and kills, man suffers for the death of his fellow men. Is life, then, a struggle, an arbitrary survival, a revenge of nature? There is a certain coldness that emerges from the tone, which is none other than the cruel indifference with which each man or woman takes the death of their loved ones from the moment they must face the truth: that the other is gone and they must continue with their own lives. The cycle continues, inexorable, unstoppable by time to rest or even reflect.

In short, *Diary of a Hunter* is the most relevant novel of this trilogy. The next problem is based on the fact of the literary resource chosen by the author. Being a first-person voice, relegated at the same time to a temporal and successive chronology, it limits the point of view not only to a character, with his limitations of language and knowledge, but to a certain field of action, setting and time included. The tone and language, therefore, run the risk of suffering from monotony or repetition. This is what happens in the second novel, where Lorenzo emigrates to Chile and, faced with failure, returns to Spain. In the *Diary of an Emigrant* many more things happen than in the first novel, however it becomes monotonous, repetitive and the novel suffers from unnecessary stretching and delays the results. If in the previous one, and because it is a diary, the literary climax is hidden and delayed, although the ending more than compensates for it, in the

second one we find nothing but anecdotes and a succession of well-narrated events that do not lead anywhere, and if they do, the direction is too trite and expected, without surprises that compensate for the resource itself, and the tone of the narrative voice seems to be exhausted. Lorenzo's personal growth becomes merely superficial, without the depth necessary for the reader's interest. Delibes is a Lorenzo is a social writer, as we know, and his characters are tender paintings not exempt from nostalgia. The depth does not come from digging into their souls but from memory and from the contrast with the place and the time. His literature is a painting made with the filter of memory. The third novel suffers from the same problem. The events are more cruel from the social point of view, more irreparable, but the narrator's voice remains cold and indifferent continuously, when the reader needs some emotion, even if it is veiled. It is not that Lorenzo does not suffer, nor that the consequences of his life learning are not seen, it is noted in a certain very veiled cynicism, in a certain irony hidden in some reflections. But the tone so equal exhausts, saturates and overwhelms the reader. It almost seems to us that we are sliding on a smooth and transparent surface through which we see Lorenzo's whole world, but without feeling the heat or the stones of his path. Only in the first novel is the resource valid, experimentally successful, adequate in length and in keeping with Delibes' literary style.

#### La hoja roja (1959)

This novel shows us Delibes at 39 years of age, affirming a style characterized by his concern for the human condition in general through common and ordinary characters, almost always marginalized from the active classes that determine the socioeconomic movement of any country. Here, instead of speaking to us of a town or the countryside, he takes us to a city, where we can also find ordinary beings, where vulgarity is not mediocrity but everyday life and a sign of sensitive and simple men, who constitute the bottom of the social pyramid. Not the poor or displaced, but the common mass of individuals who have lost that individuality throughout a life dedicated to routine and aimless work, individuals who have given up their desire to be someone by becoming amalgamated with the work or the purpose of a company or institution. Excuses, in the end, that result in a dissolution of the personality and the particular characteristics that form and are the essence of each human being. In this case we have a municipal employee who has just retired, and faced with the abyss of free time after his daily dedication to his job, to the arduous concern for trivial things - such as the system of organizing new garbage bins for the squares, for example - which have taken the place that should have been occupied by other more essential things, such as love or children, or simple personal fulfillment, he finds himself lost, seeing not much further down his path the final destination and death. Hence the title of the book: the red leaf is the

one that announces how many cigarettes are left in the tobacco box. A colleague has told him that retirement is the prelude to death, and he sees how the time that has passed has made him now have more friends in the cemetery than in the street. The novel develops two parallel stories in turn: the story of old Eloy, with his memories, and the story of the country girl who works for him, with her own recent experiences and the development of a current relationship. Both stories are intertwined in a few fragments, but there is a constant coming and going that blurs the boundaries, without mixing the two, that is, without confusing characters or experiences. The novel tells us, in this way, of two very different life experiences, but which converge and make contact, sometimes rough, other times with a soft touch, but where both are identified in a mutual way, not because of their similarities, but because of a necessary consolation for both. Even when they tell each other things from the past, while she irons or cooks, and he sits at the table, they do not even listen to each other. The important thing is to say and remember, because the past, even for a very young person, is the foundation on which each person must rely to advance one more step in life, a pillar of support, sad or happy, satisfactory or regrettable, but the only source of consolation, like all recollection, because it tells us that we are someone because we have lived. In this dialogue-monologue that the two characters engage in, the fact of repetition contributes, a resource that we have already seen in Delibes in other novels. Not only are the nicknames that follow personal names important, but here the repetition of stories or anecdotes that not only the two of them, but other secondary characters, repeat from time to time as if they had never been told before, plays a primordial role. This has a double function, among many others: as a concrete fact, about the habit of the old people to remember the past and their habitualness of repeating, due to forgetfulness or need for affirmation, episodes or sayings, and also as a representation of a recovery of the past, both to keep it alive and to remind oneself of belonging to a group, a feeling, or finally, the primordial sensation of knowing that we are still alive. In the case of the young girl, the causes may be different but the results similar, repeating or remembering anecdotes from early or recent childhood and adolescence is to recover a place from which we have left and we miss, a physical place, like a town, or a spiritual place, like the youth that quickly escapes from our hands.

The end, as in another Delibes novel, *El Camino*, confronts old Eloy with the death of a friend. He is then left as the only survivor of a group of men who have known each other since they were very young. Eloy knows that he does not have much time left. For the girl there is no good news either, her future marriage has been cancelled and her boyfriend has been imprisoned. Both end up consoling each other in the old man's apartment, but this consolation is an almost cold farewell, a raw resignation where all feeling needs to be contained so as not to fall into despair and tragedy. Tragedy in Delibes is never a dramatic effect, but something that happens outside the pages. A death is a tragedy, it is true, but the author's calm, resigned, melancholic and cynical prose presents it as another fact of life, a

natural episode that produces lumps in the throats of those who survive, but soon these lumps dissolve to give way again to the air that we are forced, out of dignity or resignation, to continue breathing in order to remain standing.

The Road (1950) The Shroud (1957)

The first, a novel, the second, a short story or long tale. Both texts were written at 30 and 37 years of age respectively. Both are narrated from the point of view of a child. The Road is about an eleven-year-old boy who, on his trip to the capital to study, remembers the moments of his brief childhood in his hometown. The trip is hardly described, it only serves as a basis for a constant flow of events and images that appear without any criteria or determined order, only that which memory and external or emotional stimuli mark. The rhythm of the train on which he will travel or is already travelling, moving away from his village. The chapters are a succession of episodes, a collection of anecdotes, a collection of village characters. Delibes' language in this case is a delicate mix between irony and localism, where mordacity is disguised as naivety. The fact that the narrator is a man remembering his point of view at the age of 11 in reference to an even earlier childhood, offers an interesting and new plus, disenchantment and nostalgia mixed with a tenderness rescued from innocence. Cruelty, therefore, is nothing but an external consequence, because the eyes that look are still free of cynicism, but already tinged with a sense of bitterness. The humour is naive but intelligent, more attached to nostalgia than to criticism, which is always absent. But the criticism is not merciless, and always contains a bit of pity for these people, good and bad, resentful and kind, selfish and submissive. A zoology of individuals that constitute a people. The style is extremely careful, it is pleasant and apparently simple, but deliberate, with a poetry that is not born from memory itself but from the distant affection of the narrator, almost piously analyzed. This way of narrating leads to a different form, sad but not entirely bitter, which we could call tenderness. The humorous episodes are masterfully alternated with other more intense and dramatic ones, some even contain a cynical, contained look of the child with respect to the adults around him. The most typical example is the episode of the hunt with his father, where the latter slightly injures his son by mistake, and instead of acknowledging it, he underestimates the fact and hides it, of course to avoid being overwhelmed by the true drama of what could have happened. The whole novel speaks of time and survival. The Simple Life is an adventure of survival, in the forest or in the city, in the countryside or in any village. Each person tries to survive his own limitations, selfishness and resentments. The spinster and her obsession with sin, the priest and his commitment to a blind community, the blacksmith and his refuge in the strength of his body. Another important theme is the nicknames. Delibes

uses the nicknames after the proper name, constantly. This repetition brings musicality to the work, while the insistence, passing through different steps in the reader, grants a verisimilitude based on confidentiality, on a new and strong intimacy between the reader and the character. The Mochuelo, the Moñigo, the Tiñoso, are nicknames that intersect with the proper name and acquire an even stronger meaning that accentuates the identification between the appearance and the interior of the character. Repetition is also present in aspects of the character, such as the priest, "who was a great saint," or the fact that Tiñoso "was given baldness by a bird." This way The fact of narrating is an achievement in itself, a discovery that goes beyond the local language so often used by Pérez Galdós. Delibes unifies in a cultured and elegant style both language and vulgar or ordinary feeling. Language becomes the subject described.

The road speaks of two milestones in life: childhood and death. From one it jumps to the other. From memory we travel quickly to the death of a friend in his childhood. Tiñoso has died, and his friend Mochuelo buries him with a dead bird, which his friend was a keen observer of. Symbolisms of the beginning and end of life. Mochuelo has learned to see the future.

In *The Shroud* we find a boy whose father dies as soon as he comes home from work at the beginning of the night. He is in the forest, and his father, who has undressed as always to sleep, has died, and he, the boy, realizes that he must cover his father's nakedness before someone else arrives. Thus the boy recalls, as he tries in vain to lift his father's huge, strong body, the vicissitudes of their short life together. First mutual admiration, then disappointment and shame. Because he knows that his father, seeing him weak and thin, had begun to be ashamed of his son. But this does not represent recrimination or rancour, only the common, mature wisdom of a child who matures in the face of his first death. Then, as he cannot achieve his goal, he decides to ask for help. Everyone refuses him for different reasons: they are at odds with the father, they are afraid of the dead or they cannot leave their jobs. Finally, the one who accompanies him does so in the hope of obtaining some goods and clothes that the deceased will no longer be able to use. The body is covered and morning comes. One of those who had refused appears and takes charge of watching over the dead man while the boy goes to the village to tell them. So the boy, who has endured and resisted the whole dark night beside the dead man and his helplessness, is finally afraid when the sunlight comes. This story is masterful in its construction and its meaning. The symbolism of "the shroud" and the clothes that cover the naked body of a dead man enclose a whole conception of human life as we can come to know it. Delibes does not speak to us of the afterlife, even religion and the idea of God are traditions and customs that have little to do with life itself and its fleeting duration. The body is everything, he seems to tell us, the dignity of the body is as exquisite and delicate as its fragility and vulnerability in the hands of time. Here too, as in *The Road*, the child is the point of reference, the centre of ideas and conceptions, the axis of the world's action. His

naive and preconceived ideas clash with the reality of the adult world, but which of the two is truer? The discovery of reality brings us closer to truths that are too absolute and irreversible, it brings us closer to death.

Múrdoxé

Lo que dura un concierto (2010)

The collection is divided into twelve cantos that contain twelve poems each. Even in Canto 8, which contains three long poems, each of these is subdivided by pagination into four others. But beyond the intentions or the analogies, arbitrary and obviously deliberate, of the author, this structure adds a homogenization to the set of poems, it also grants it a unity that is already given from the confluence of the thematic variety and the literary tone that runs through the entire book. This tone is a delicate alchemy achieved with the capacity of a poetic synthesis that is never dark or hermetic, never exaggeratedly austere. The tone is pleasant, colloquial in the result but never made with grammatical instruments taken from everyday speech, but highly exact, precise, without blunt edges or effective or tasteless twists. The images do not stand out for their flash but for their slow precision, their firmness and their strength, skills that make them penetrate the reader's intellect, forming layers that sediment, deepening the reader's clean and reflective emotion. This is especially evident in the long poems of Canto 8, perhaps the most accomplished of all, in my opinion, but in the short poems it can be clearly seen how they add up one to the other in each Canto, until creating a climate, a conclusion that is reached through a poetic reflection. These poems produce, then and above all, an emotional reflection, and the language used is key to this result, undoubtedly particular and very peculiar for what is possible to read in contemporary poetry. As for the subject matter, although varied, it hovers between certain ranges that demonstrate the author's concerns: relationships, women, writing, mystery and the strangeness of everyday life. A typical example is the following poem: "What does a child see/ who sees a ghost/ when he doesn't know/ fear?" Here we see it summarized in four In these short verses, a whole philosophy of life, a way of seeing the world, with its men, women and objects included, and all the strange and unknown things they contain, a position willing to scrutinize and reflect on the few discoveries we make throughout life. The author does not seek a way to explain the world, even though every view intends to do so at first, but to transmit it by moderating its crudeness of forms but not of content, through art, rounding off the original edges to form something new: a poem that allows us to think of the world as another product of our mind. Hence

the following example from Canto 2: "the real world/in an imaginary language//maps/where the ear/loses its step."

Claudio Archubi

The Shape of Water (2010)

These stories by Archubi have several points in common, both thematically and stylistically, which determines not only a homogeneity for the whole but also a characteristic way of narrating, which it would not be risky, despite being his first book, to call style. The language is strikingly neat and rich, carefully crafted, with a mixture of poetic synthesis and a philosophical depth that does not bore because it is strictly literary. The elements or resources that contribute to this type of construction are the following. First of all, all these stories are narrated in the present tense, a resource that is in itself risky due to the limitations it implies and at the same time due to the wide possibilities of interpretation. However, added to other resources that we will mention later, the present collaborates and determines that the times elapsed or described, the anecdotes and episodes, the remembered stories, are subjected and yield their peculiarities to amalgamate into a timelessness that allows identification, a direct approach with the reader. It also helps the characters, whose identity seems to be confused in a mixture of indirect voices, secondary and main characters, to give up the selfish use of their individuality to add it to the whole, and to collaborate with this timelessness that now has a more precise, though not particular, taste and smell. Space is also a victim of this present time, and places and sites also follow one another and alternate, traveling back and forth in time. All this forms, then, a symbiotic oddity that shares all the spaces and times narrated without being limited to any of them, forming an idea more than a feeling, a smell and a memory that sneaks through the reader's senses until it penetrates deep places. The final lines of each story have the shocking habit of moving with a delicate subtlety, of shocking with the terribleness of a somatized idea or a feeling subjected to an emotion. Another element that is part of what has already been mentioned is that the characters whose point of view is taken by the narrator, tend to actually refer to themselves through a third person. When they talk about others they are actually talking about themselves. But the resource is not fantastic, but allegorical, remaining within the limits of the everyday, of common and ordinary reality as we see it at first sight. This resource of the double is not such, then, but a kind of mirror image. Another resource, this time thematic, is to use an external or internal sign, secondary to the axis of the story, parallel to it, which serves as a comparison, as an element of disquiet, always in the shadow of the main

fact. For example, in the first story: The glass, both the mother of one of the protagonists, the bonsai or the sewing machine, take on properties of time that we do not see passing through the main path, but which are the framework that shows us the terribleness of what they tell us in a slow, parsimonious and sometimes indifferent way. Something similar happens in the story Uñas, where the figure of the intruder is rather a symbolism of something that represents a simultaneous hope or fear, an ambivalent symbol. The language, therefore, is a cultured, poetic and highly expressive language. It is a language that does not aim to transmit circumstances or actions in particular but ideas that contain philosophy and a deep knowledge of human behavior and nature. A language that evades explanations to focus on gestures, landscapes, where the colors and consistency of things are the essence of the human factor, understood as a confluence of nature, time, space and heritage. A scientific but not scientific look, a look piously elaborated with the same materials as the object of study. Repetition, another constant element or idea throughout the stories, is an eloquent symbolism of this loss and gain and loss that constitute human life, according to the author's view. Water, perhaps the most representative of these stories of what we have just expressed, has been the primary object of study for human knowledge, a substance that has and has no form, an entity that gives life and in itself is nothing more than a set of easily malleable molecules. Subject to permanent changes, it is to the body what the soul is to the human being, everything and nothing at the same time.

Ethan Canin

The Emperor of the Air (1988) Blue River (1992)

At 28 years old, Canin published his first book, a collection of stories that places him in a preferential place within the new North American and world narrative. What is surprising in him is not only the quality of his language, very high and of great consistency and extreme good taste, but the solidity of the stories told, and above all an emotional depth that also has the enormous merit of the necessary restraint and the exact balance, without overflowing at any moment or crossing the limits, not only of good taste, which he never abandons, but of what is essential to "tell." This is one of the keys to the effectiveness of his texts. All the stories are narrated by witnesses or protagonists, and despite being implicitly involved in what they tell, the tone of the narration is one of a parsimony and detachment that seems to border on coldness, but it is never like that, because there is a certain feeling of anguish hovering in the air. The narrator transmits this existential anguish with his tone without describing it directly, nor making



philosophy out of it, but rather telling stories of families. All the stories talk about families, they are the narrative core, the existential core where each human being learns to behave and acquires values that, irremediably, they will never be able to get rid of. These stories talk about the behavior of people in general and within their families in particular, because through their behavior with the rest of the members of the same family group we see what they are and how they are. There are characters that could be classified as stereotyped: rigid and severe parents, overbearing neighbors, violent brothers; But in each of them there is something that the protagonist-narrator discovers, barely hinted at towards the end of the texts, something that leads us to think that they are not quite as they appear, that they act with the same uncertainty and the same anxiety as one, or the protagonist narrator (another game of mirrors). And so it is, then, where the secondary characters are a mirror of the narrator character: a reflection in which the protagonist, with the excuse of shielding himself from all accusation by being the one who tells the story, the chronicler far from any possible guilt, almost a judge, must face. What the others are, we are also, he seems to discover and tell us.

This leads us to talk about *Blue River*, the second book and first novel, published at the age of 32. The novel takes up characters from one of the stories, *American Beauty*, where we are told a story of contained violence between two brothers and a sister. The novel returns to these characters and develops the story of the family from childhood. Childhood, let's say it once and for all, is the main axis of Canin's point of view. It is the place where everything begins, it is even the tone that he has chosen to tell us these stories. Not a happy or carefree tone, but nostalgic, uncertain in many ways, like those sad memories that filter unintentionally into good memories. The novel is a slow discovery of what we are as human beings: a series of characters that alternate in the predominance of our behaviors. The narrator's voice seems to be the judge, the one that imposes itself by being the accepted and balanced one, but this image that the protagonist has of himself will be transformed before the eyes of the reader. The narrator will give us clues that this is so, but his tone will be like that of someone telling someone else's story, he will self-analyze little but will relate with an enviable impartiality, exactly like a judge of himself. A dissection without prejudice, only narration of facts and truths without exaggeration. It is not by chance that the protagonist, like the author, is a doctor. The point of view we are talking about is in line with the gaze of a professional who is dedicated to evaluating the health of the body and mind.

This is very clear in one of the stories, perhaps the most moving of the entire collection, *Night Travelers*, where this time we have two elderly protagonists, one of whom is the narrator. He tells us, towards the end, when he takes the hand of the woman who has accompanied him all his life, and for whom he no longer feels love but a kind of pity and compassion: "Now we are lost in seas and deserts. My hand finds her fingers and grabs

them, bones and tendons, fragile objects." What other more direct and terrible, simpler way to express the fragility of man? In the novel, the narrator says something similar: "We still don't know anything. That's why I don't conceive that faith is closer to the truth than science." *Blue River*, then, becomes a mirror of behavior. The violent brother, perhaps psychologically altered, serves as a breaking point for the narrator protagonist, who believes himself to be unscathed and beyond the misfortunes of the world. If in his childhood he justified his older brother's behavior because it was a source of admiration and value, of determination and courage, of rebellion, now he considers him dangerous for his established way of life: the house with a pool, the well-paid job, his wife and his son. The brother's return represents a danger and he must be returned to the place from which he came, a place as far away as his childhood memories. But he will soon learn that those memories return because they are right there, very close, that one cannot escape from them nor reject their gaze. Preconceived ideas collapse in the face of the development of memory, which expands, showing facts in all their cruelty, until it shows that what we think is not so, that everything has its twist and its double bottom. That what we think we are is not as true as we might claim. The end shows a sign of hope, a kind of reconciliation between brothers, which is nothing more than a kind of truce, or forgiveness, or justification, towards ourselves. Who could say what it is really about. The narrator knows it when at the end he tells us, already looking for his brother, that he feels "a sudden, ethereal euphoria, which may be faith, or God, or blinding light."

Canin's literature is revealing, forceful and devastating in its search for hidden truths. There are no literary fireworks, the tone is poetic and simple, with greyish tones that dazzle in their contrasting black and white endings, excessive more for what they imply than for what they say. The effectiveness of the language and the structure are based on formal and traditional procedures, and it even dares to use the second person in a large part of the novel. All these modes, which do not deviate from the apparently conventional, show us that good literature is not dead, that there are ways to renew genres without changing them, it is simply necessary to delve into good stories and sharpen one's gaze, as Canin does with his pen, which seems more like a scalpel.

Jean Paul Sartre

*La náusea* (1938)

What is "*la náusea*"? The reader asks himself throughout the book. Different interpretations are given throughout the pages, and sometimes

none are plausible. The entire novel could even be called a novel. In the form of a diary, kept arbitrarily and without regularity, and for only a few days, the narrator describes the daily life of a character who is not and is at the same time the true author of the work, an alter ego who is searching for the reason for existence. And this search constitutes not only the objective of the work and of life, but the very reason for existence. The narrator then only finds arbitrary, futile, fleeting reasons for living. Reasons without weight, unjustified reasons. All life is a vertigo, a great nausea. At one point he tells us, very early on, that by writing this diary he has the impression of doing a work of imagination, and that the characters of a novel seem more real to him. Here comes the factor of identity: are we characters in our own novel? Sartre tells us that "those who live in society have learned to look at themselves in mirrors, just as their friends see them. I have no friends, is that why my flesh is so naked?" And this identity of man is confused with the identity of things and their transience, for example, when the pleasure of listening to a song is disturbed by fragility in the face of time: "nothing can interrupt it and everything can break it." He then comes to the sad consolation of thinking that all the things in the world are soft masses that move spontaneously and are lost, while "stones are something hard, and that does not move," like the Boulevard Noir, "which is inhuman like a mineral, like a triangle. It is fortunate that there is such a boulevard..." Sartre knows that time is "unique and irreplaceable, and yet I would not lift a finger to prevent its annihilation." Because every step taken by another corresponds to something that someone else does on the other side of the world.

The protagonist is writing a biography of the Marquis de Rollebon, a secondary character whose attraction lies in his insignificance and in the extravagance of his life. He believes that he has found a reason for his life, but finally he realizes that he is trying to justify his present with a fact from the past, and the past is nothing more than that. However, sometimes the past is so heavy, "that a man alone, with his body, cannot stop the events." memories". Sometimes he would like to stop the flow of time, the nausea, stop things in their eternal metamorphosis, even "those unstable beings, those in the history books, who perhaps within an hour would collapse". The protagonist comes to admire the human race only for its creation of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, everything else is transitory and futile. Existence, nausea, is nothing. Later, he realizes that he has no place, that his very essence or justification is to be superfluous, and that the world and himself exist, but even this is of no importance to him, nothing matters to him anymore. An interesting allegory is the one he makes about the sea: he tells us that everyone sees the shiny, silvery, mirror-like surface of the sea, but does not see what is beneath: "the sea is cold and black, full of animals; He crawls under this thin surface to deceive people." Another magnificent image is the one that says: "the shiny velvety skins, the skins of the good Lord burst everywhere...". Things surround him, "the unnameable, only without words, without defense." "A tree scratches the ground under my feet with a black nail." These images are a find and the very substance of

an entire philosophy: existentialism. It is philosophy expressed without unnecessary erudition, succinctly, closer to the expressiveness of silence than to encyclopedism. It is pure poetry. Then he tells us: "if we existed, we had to exist until the green, the bloating, the obscenity."

Conclusions: existence is a fullness that man cannot abandon; everything that exists is born without reason, is prolonged by weakness and dies by chance; it is a deep boredom at the heart of existence. In the novel, characters, descriptions and anecdotes follow one another. The climate is nostalgic and evocative, beautifully expressed. The conceptual does not overwhelm because it is wisely alternated with the descriptive and the narrative. There is a final episode that has as its protagonist one of the secondary characters, which takes place in a library, a sad episode of a lonely man whom society confuses and punishes for his tendency to solitude and isolation. "Existence is what I fear." The ending is slightly hopeful, the protagonist finds pleasure in a beautiful song that aims to resist the ravages of time and its nothingness.

Ernest Hemingway

*A Farewell to Arms* (1929)

Published when the author was 30 years old, written over almost ten years, since the end of the war that inspired it, this novel is an icon of war novels, and a milestone in 20th century literature. Hemingway demonstrated, after having done so before with his books of short stories, that literature had not been exhausted by its own vices and mannerisms. He also stated that the change that his style imposed on American literature, and later, due to his influence, on American and world literature, was possible not only in short narratives, but also in long texts. His style, it is worth remembering, is absolutely characteristic. Exact, concise descriptions, minimally essential. Short, brief, intelligent, contained, but extremely eloquent dialogues. Continuous, transcendent actions, which always contribute something to the reader to enrich the characteristics of the character and the situation. An exact balance between the situation and the character, where the latter is the situation because the action barely exists if the character is not visually clear, and in turn the protagonist is diluted if the circumstance is not clear. This from the grammatical and stylistic point of view. From the content, the stories are always compelling, sometimes anecdotal as inspiration but never as an end, that is, they always tell something intense, even though this intensity is precisely in what is not said. Hemingway's readers must get used to reading between the lines. The actions are often continuous and involving, as when he describes the actions of war, the adventures of the soldiers, the battles or life in the

hospital. The dialogues may seem simple at first sight, because they are short and concise, sometimes repetitive. However, they are always natural, and tend to highlight, with that repetition that never becomes rhetoric, a characteristic of the character, something that defines him above all others. With a simple stage direction, the character is born, and is there, as if we were seeing him on the big screen of the cinema, but here we can even smell him, his person and his environment, we can touch him, just as the ambulance driver, the protagonist of the novel, touches and kisses his nurse wife. The content, then, has not only a great, important story, but is transmitted in a peculiar way, with the stylistic features mentioned above, which facilitates, paradoxically, the emotional transmission. It doesn't take many words or long sentences to do it, an adjective is enough.

Hemingway's novel is a novel that is capable of triggering something in the reader, a memory, an emotion. Therefore, the Hemingway reader must be a trained reader to appreciate it properly, so as not to stay on the surface of the page. There are fragments that not only hint at the emotional recesses of the characters, but also tend to poke their fingers into the cracks of human nature, as when we are told: "The rain scares me because sometimes I see dead people when it rains," or "I'm going to wait to see the Anglo-Saxon cleaning his sins with a toothbrush," or "We are born with everything we have and we learn nothing." The novel is divided into five parts, each dedicated to an episode in the life of the protagonist, the attack in which he is wounded, his convalescence in the hospital, his pursuit by the military police, his escape and life with his wife. The ending is surprising. Almost a hundred years have passed, hundreds of war novels, pacifist ones like this one, and the plots tend to repeat themselves, and the endings suffer from this, no doubt. But here, after so many plots in novels and films, we find a round trip that demonstrates Hemingway's narrative genius. The journey between the life and death of his wife and son keeps us in suspense until the end. We presume the death of one of the two, at times the almost carefree style of the narrator induces a certain hope of a happy ending. But the ending is overwhelming, it is natural, it is symbolic and at the same time realistic. The protagonist ends up alone, as at the beginning, but not completely, now he has the presence of an absence, a pain that time may dissolve and attenuate. Leaving behind the body of his dead wife, which suggests the image of a statue, he goes out into the rain, always a symbol of eternal sadness.

#### Men without Women (1927)

Fourteen stories contained under the title *Men without Women*, which encloses a whole philosophy of life that the protagonists suffer as an

unavoidable choice, and at the same time imposed by life itself. War, boxing, bullfighting, are activities that man chooses out of passion but that expose him to a situation different from the rest of the people, isolates him from others and makes him more vulnerable than he expects. A way of life that teaches him to fight constantly, but that leads him to strip himself, to give up certain daily routines. Friendship and love seem to be factors that can be given up, susceptible to the circumstances that some other passion decides when and how it needs. Thus, the protagonist of *El invicto*, plays his last bullfight knowing that he has the possibility of winning that battle against the bull, but not the war against death. In *The Killers*, the character shows total resignation to the same thing, the fate and death represented by those who come to kill him, deciding to abandon himself to wait lying in his room. Stories like *In Another Country*, *Now I Lie Down*, *Che Ti Dice La Patria*, are post-war stories that show the consequences of the war, the way in which the protagonists suffer or have adapted to certain circumstances. In *Fifty Thousand Dollars* we find a boxer in decline who bets in favor of his opponent, another way of fighting death knowing that he will lose in advance.

Hemingway's stories are stories, often more impressionistic than narrative, often almost anecdotal and descriptive, but in all of them there is a plot that the reader has the obligation to decipher through intuition, because Hemingway's narrative suggests more than it says, and to do so he uses an exact balance between what is expressed and what is hidden. *The Killers* is a classic example, the dialogue between the secondary characters is what imposes and explains the situation. The protagonist remains in the background in many lines, but emerges as a great weight at the end of the story, being the situation, the character and the symbol at the same time. In *Hills Like White Elephants* we find a couple arguing about an unexpressed situation, but which the reader intuits and senses almost without mistake, and whatever it is, we know that it weighs on and affects the lives of the protagonists. In *An Alpine Idyll* we see that death, as unavoidable as for all the protagonists of the stories, in this case is taken as an irremediable custom, and the bodies as simple inanimate objects towards which certain duties imposed by law or custom must be fulfilled. In *Ten Little Indians*, Hemingway demonstrates his exquisite sensitivity with the exact words at the end, making his male protagonist lament, in the harsh and bloody environment of the American West of the 19th century, for a heart broken by the lack of love between a settler and an Indian woman. But all these situations have no psychological development, they are only expressed through everyday dialogues that say more than they seem, and the symbol, sometimes clearer, other times more hidden, is the poetic representative, the climax, the reason for the story or tale. Published at the age of 28, this collection of stories is an intense, brief and fully promising dose of what his work would later bring us.

## Stories

This compilation by the Luis de Caralt publishing house, in Barcelona, is a classic for lovers of Hemingway's work in Spanish, as well as a reference text for literary workshops. This collection contains 33 Hemingway stories, if not all, a great majority, none of which can be classified as bad or mediocre, although they are of lesser importance within his work. In addition to some stories originally contained in his second book of stories, *Men Without Women*, we find some of the following stories. *After the Storm* is a different text in the author's usual style, more for the language than for the point of view, since it does not deviate from the usual child or adolescent narrator protagonist. Here the point of view poetically highlights the landscape and the discovery of a sunken ship, and its subsequent looting by hands more expert than his own. As always in Hemingway, it is a clear allegory about death and the survival of the fittest. *A Clean and Well-Lighted Place* returns to the concise style, full of dialogues, seemingly inconsequential, but which exudes an emotion that permeates the reader's clothes, resulting in one of Hemingway's best and most sublime short stories. *Something You Will Never Be* is a description of a character who has suffered the consequences of war, not only physically but mentally, and what we read moves us because of the author's exquisite good taste in saying and expressing the crudest things in the most direct and yet subtle way. *The Mother of an Ace* has as its protagonist an antihero, and no matter how much the narrator takes sides, the description is never affected or judgmental. *A Day of Waiting* is a story with a very childish, very innocent look at the arrival of death, reminiscent of the naivety of *Tini*, by Eduardo Wilde. *A Natural History of the Dead*, once again departs from the usual discourse, with a more Faulknerian language in its moderate excess and quasi-philosophical content on death and the dead. In *The Wine of Wyoming* the author returns to the American West, transmitting with his style the crude, dusty climate, the contained, cruel and stupid characters, excessively human. *The Gambler*, *the Nun* and *the Radio* is another post-war story set in a convalescent hospital, and we find the usual Hemingway with his characters and his method of telling: the war, the description of the characters through dialogue, their feelings through their actions, the singing, the game, the conversation, their doing nothing, in short, their hopelessness. *The Old Man on the Bridge* is a short little gem where the clear and edifying symbolism does not overshadow the expert, concise, clear narrative. *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* is a long story that is one of Hemingway's masterpieces. Its language, divided into third-person fragments and dreamlike episodes, builds a painting where the African environment gains ground over the personal history of the main couple. The personal drama, the individual failure, the hopelessness that constitute the man's background, seem to be the central point from which the signs that dominate the African landscape emerge and converge simultaneously: the imminent danger, the strangeness, the mystery that

slowly turns into a terror as everyday as the cold of the night. The Happy Life of Francis Macomber is another long story and one of which we find what is typical of Hemingway at its best: intense drama and a refined and exact style. A safari organized by a millionaire and his wife turns into a tragedy involving cowardice, bravery and betrayal. What is apparent is never what it really is, and behind every human action there are multiple meanings. The crudeness of the ending is only comparable and in keeping with the hypocritical and cruel attitudes of the characters throughout the story. In Indian Camp, the character of Nick and his doctor father appear in the American West, protagonists of a series of stories where the point of view of a child and then a young man is contrasted with his discovery of the landscape and the characters with whom he grows up and lives. His vision is virgin and melancholic at the same time, it is impartial but pious. Perhaps the most moving example is the story The Wrestler, where Nick meets an ex-wrestler marked physically and mentally by the consequences of his activity and way of life (another means of confrontation similar to war, boxing or bullfighting, as we have already seen, including fishing, as in The Old Man and the Sea). Here, the description of the fighter is a very moving one, and the story is a very moving one. The character is purely Hemingway: "... his face was disfigured. His nose was sunken, his lips were a misshapen mass, and his eyes were mere slits. Nick didn't see it all at once. He only noticed that the man's face was mutilated." The Soldier's Return takes up the aftermath of war and its usual consequences of loss and confusion for those who return. The Father is another story told by a son who remembers the figure of his father, a jockey with a peculiar personality, who has left his mark on him forever, and his account of his death. Once again, the anecdotal is enhanced by the nostalgic and poetic language, but tight and concise at the same time. The River of Two Hearts is a story that is more descriptive than narrative, where the landscape that the character discovers on his way in search of a suitable place to fish becomes an allegory of great poetry about man and his close and conflicting contact with nature, his nature.

Andrés Carreño

Al lado de la ruta (2010)

Carreño's first published novel falls at first glance into what is commonly called social literature. The protagonist is a child who collects cardboard, and throughout the novel we see him facing the sordid, difficult, terrible environment of those who survive in poverty and marginality in every urban conglomerate. The city could be Buenos Aires, Rosario, or any other Latin American city, but the reality it expresses, beyond the names, is a



reality that we can all see every day. But here we must deal with the effectiveness and the result of this novel, and we can say that it fulfills its objectives far beyond what the author perhaps wanted to express. The setting is the sordidity of a class and a social environment, but the theme is the human condition, whatever the environment in question. What is right about Carreño's treatment is not to have stayed in the social theme, not to have been satisfied with the surface. The treatment, then, is not socio-political but humanistic. But not as a moralizing message but simply as the objective of the author's point of view, who has set his sights not on everyday life or on the sordidness already mentioned, but on the factors that mobilize the actions of men. It is not by chance that the protagonist is a child. His gaze is being formed, he is apprehending what is inside each man. Thus, he will see that in his friend, apparently hard and rough, there is a touching tenderness and an enormous capacity for affection; he will learn that the life of a woman, in this case his sister, takes paths that do not respond to the ideal we made of her; that death has been deposited in his mother, slowly degrading her; that madness is an uncontrollable weapon; that he himself is not only a cog in a social system, but is also made of the same conflicting substance as other men. The novel's highlight is the poetics of language, the gaze that emerges from the poetry found in simple things, in objects, in everyday situations, but also in what is important: the beauty of the terrible, of death, of silence, of nothingness as an inexorable result. The ending is successful, intense. The shock becomes meditation, with a residue of anguish that is not bitter but accepted, understood as inevitable, and therefore also part of human nature. The sordid, the terrible, is within us, the protagonist's experience tells us. We follow a path that we cannot change. The cruel reaches a limit in the narrator's voice, his good taste knows when it is time to stop naming more, because it is already implicit in the situations he has seen and of which it is also the irremediable cause, situations of madness, death and perdition.

José Saramago

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ (1991)

In principle, we will say that language and style are Saramago's characteristics. The narrative fluidity and descriptive richness, the peculiar structural and aesthetic characteristics of the author in the use of punctuation marks and dialogues, the point of view that takes the characters as protagonists of a play that is narrated rather than staged. What draws attention is the theme: the life of Jesus Christ, since we know from his own confession the atheism or at least skepticism in religious matters on the part of the author. Almost half of the novel is dedicated to

the life of Jesus' parents and to Jesus as a child and adolescent, and in this first part something in particular stands out: the apparent intention of giving a more truthful and less dogmatic version of the life of Jesus, almost documentary we could say, which seems to contradict Saramago's usual characteristic of taking contemporary themes and presenting them as allegories. But this intention, as in every good writer, is only an instrument, almost one more character, one more element within the story. the narrative structure, to create something different. Because he is not recreating and giving a faithful version based on recent historical-scientific discoveries, but a mixture of fiction and reality, of legend and written tradition. Saramago intends, it seems to us, to demonstrate the fallacy of established truths, the ambiguity of historical reality, and to do so he uses allegory subtly mixed with fiction and chronicle, narration and religious writing. In this first half, the supernatural is presented in a timid, insecure, established but ambiguous way. Everything can be the result of the characters' imagination. The presence of angels and demons can be attributed to nocturnal fantasies, shadow play and religious obsessions of the protagonists. But then, in the second half, the author already asserts his game and the reader understands and must accept the rules of this peculiar verisimilitude if he wants to continue reading the novel. The supernatural is fed by the psychological, and neither one nor the other denies or contradicts the other. Historical reality forms the foundation, or rather the first floor, since the true foundation of every literary text is narrative invention. Then comes fantasy to provide a plane of contrasts that enrich not only the parchment-like aroma of every historical novel, but also to illuminate the figure of the characters. Joseph, for example, with his terrible feeling of guilt; Mary, with her triviality and her simplicity, her almost narrow and rudimentary intelligence; Mary Magdalene, with her perception and her sensitive acuity; Jesus himself, with his adolescent rebellion extended well into adulthood.

Therefore, the merits of this work are multiple: the language, the style, the argumentative structure, the point of view, the historical variations and licenses, the individual richness of each character, who has been taken out of his usual conventional theater costumes and has been submerged in a corrosive acid that highlights his interior: flaws and virtues. Judas as an ordinary man to whom God has given a role to fulfill, and whom Jesus is about to resurrect because he knows that he too is another victim of God, another underpaid actor in the cast of a director who tries to reach a larger audience, because that is the revealed truth: God's need for more power. The Devil as a beggar character who collects the waste from God's plan, and who knows that the more God wins, the more he will win. Lazarus, not resurrected, because it would be a merciless God to condemn him to die a second time. The God that Saramago presents to us is a cruel God, who does not hesitate to condemn not only his own son, but to condemn the world and its entire future to an endless series of cruelties and crimes, always in His name. But this same God does not seem to be a demon but a simple rich and bored old man, someone who cannot control his own needs

or mistakes. What he wants for an instant he does and it is fulfilled, because he is God and not even he himself can go against himself. Everything is written, even the life of God, and this is a mixture of Jewish tradition and a skeptical and irreverent attitude. Absolute good is incongruent with life, evil is a necessary part of life itself. God makes mistakes and his own son asks men to forgive him.

This novel is, then, an irreverent version, a realistic version, a fictional version of the gospels, but it is undoubtedly a highly accomplished novel, an intense and moving version of the human condition and its relationship with the divinities that it decides to invent and worship, speaking simultaneously of the father-son relationship, of guilt and remorse, of true love against established conventions, of hypocrisy. The Jesus that the author presents to us is a man confused by the double nature of his origin, resentful of both his earthly and divine father, tired of his own power and at the same time limited in its use by paternal authority, inhabitant of two worlds, not really part of either and an instrument of both. But what stands out in the treatment of the character is not so much his incarnation or his vivacity as an actor in the drama, because Saramago's style exploits the capacities of the symbol more than of concrete reality. His characters gain strength and materialize through the skill of his language, which is particularly rich and accurate here, overflowing when it must be, passionate when he speaks of God and his hypocrisies, emotional when he describes the simplicity of daily life, intense and mystical, even humorous, tinting certain situations with absurd traits, such as when he speaks to us of the supposed virginity of Mary, or the sex of the shepherds with their sheep. Irreverent moments of everyday humanity within a novel that aims to convert a dogma into a simple and moving story transformed by multiple multiple voices over time.

### The Stone Raft (1986)

Saramago is characterized by his peculiar narrative form. Two main and recurring elements are part of his structures, of his language: the tone of fable or allegory, one or the other predominating depending on the novel, never discarding realism in the topics dealt with, but always filtered by irony and criticism, black humor but with a traditional aspect, more hermetic at times, more bitter and less subtle than Anglo-Saxon humor, and the language, which in keeping with this style, resorts to the indirect method of narrating the dialogues, altering the usual punctuation marks and dashes. In this way, the author achieves a healthy balance between the intimacy of the characters and the collective drama. Because here, as in many other novels, for example *Essay on Blindness*, a collective tragedy is the main protagonist, but the characters come to the foreground to

interpret it, and the reader then becomes involved with them by sharing their problems.

In *The Stone Raft*, the Iberian Peninsula breaks away from Europe and drifts, albeit on a capricious course, across the Atlantic Ocean. The absurdity of the subject becomes credible because of the way pseudo-scientific explanations alternate with personal drama. But it is not science fiction, but rather a literature that could be called social, and therefore realistic, in inverted commas. The theories that follow one another and the social changes, even if they have the color of the serious, fall due to their own implausibility, but not because they are not credible, but because they are born from the same absurdity of man, so small and ignorant before the mysteries of the world. The earth moves, man dies, and no one is capable of giving an exact explanation. The connections with magical realism are evident, but here the fantastic is not taken as part of reality until long after it has happened and has been accepted by the protagonists. They adapt to the drama and try to survive, sometimes avoiding it, never solving it. Therefore, all of this is an allegory about the human condition in general: tragedy, lack of communication, impossibility of any kind, the idea of divinity as a fictitious, capricious entity, more incapable than man himself. Here God is permanently mentioned as a being who does not know the creatures and the world he has created. The criticism, then, is evident, both political, social and religious.

Saramago fights taboos and prejudices in a literary way, that is, as the minstrels and old storytellers did: with fables or parables. Another resource that contributes to this structure that makes up such a peculiar world, both narrative from the technical point of view and fiction, is the peculiarity of incorporating dialogues within the indirect tone. In appearance it is indirect, but direct strictly speaking, which makes the characters take on a personality, but without abandoning the voice and mind of the one who created them. Saramago's vision is pessimistic but the tone is hopeful, as if he did not find solutions but rather methods of getting through life. There is a fragment that contains a particular philosophy, without having to resort to the polemic about the existence or not of God. I quote: "...when coincidences are what is most found and prepared in this world, if coincidences are not the logic of the world itself."

The group of characters chosen as protagonists is typical of legend or allegory. The couples, the man alone and the dog, the latter as a messenger animal between earth, heaven and hell. The relationships between Saramago the author and his characters, fill the place of the questioned divinity, that is why he tells us at one point that: "...the importance of the issues is variable, it depends on the point of view, the mood of the moment, the personal sympathy, the objectivity of the narrator is a modern invention, it is enough to see that not even God Our Lord wanted it in his book." This sharp and critical definition defines a whole position in very few words. A philosophy of life, a literary philosophy. Both things are, most

likely, I would say for sure, different and the same at the same time. The way Saramago takes charge of speaking about love, death, old age, human weaknesses does nothing more than show us the pity hidden behind an ironic and apparently elegantly crude pen. He understands and pities man, but he does not justify it, just as he does not justify God's negligence towards his own children. The author's allegory is to put his creatures in a tragic situation, as is always the case in the world and the very condition of man on earth - he is born to die - and to show us how he develops with his intelligence and his feelings. Sometimes intelligence prevails, almost always, and feelings fail, but regret and bitterness triumph. In the end, hope appears timidly, but already ready in the last pages to be more than a word. a literary one: he tells us that the excellence of a text is not such when it needs to be mentioned. "It is worth saying that by emphasizing in too much detail the merits of a work of art, one is admitting that there are no such merits." The following essays study Longfellow and Hawthorne. As for the former, whom he criticizes harshly but with just reasons, he is concerned to make it clear that moral intention does not serve as a poetic effect, or that the lack of a leading idea is fatal for a literary text. Regarding Hawthorne, he emphasizes his originality above his genius as a narrator. Both are contemporary colleagues, and he shows us the sincerity and total lack of hypocrisy in his thinking about the literature of his time. Another interesting point about criticism: by pointing out defects, we do nothing more than highlight its merits. Then comes a commentary on a travel book by a certain Stephens to Arabia, which serves to demonstrate Poe's cryptographic and geographical-historical knowledge. The commentary on the chess-playing automaton that was shown in various countries around the world is an interesting example of his deductive ability, which he would apply in his detective stories. Finally, in *Marginalia* Poe brings together a series of diverse comments on literature in general. Here, more than ever, and despite the diversity itself, we find a writer of great lucidity, with a purely practical ability in the expression of his expressive intentions. We could list each of the accurate comments on poetic language, on philosophy, mathematics and science, but all this is summed up in the declaration of principles that the author establishes from the introduction: "I decided, at last, to trust in the intelligence and sensitivity of the reader as a general rule." This comment shows that he never underestimated the intelligence of the reader, that his texts were directed at interested and intelligent readers, and that the target of his criticism was generally the arbitrary criteria of the editors, the interested hypocrisy of many writers and the intellectual mediocrity of the upper middle class of his country. *Eureka* presents us with a writer who is prepared to think about the material and metaphysical universe. It is not a strictly scientific essay, nor a purely philosophical one, but a confluence between both disciplines. Rather, it is a study developed from the meditations and hypotheses of a writer-thinker. Poe starts from scientific theories already established up to his time, for example the one that speaks of the disposition and formation of the solar system, and from this he

establishes conjectures that try to demonstrate with his particular logic and reasoning a series of events that could have occurred. The result is a complex but carefully reasoned, although arbitrary, process. Poe does not base himself on strict scientific verifications, but on the logic of his thought, and this is more than enough for him, and we could say that it is also enough for us, his readers of the 21st century. Because we know that what we are reading is a genre that, like the detective story, he also founded, practically. The thinkers of the 16th to 19th centuries, if they were not scientists or philosophers by profession, had the enviable virtue of observing the world with a re-creative gaze. In general, thanks to this intuition, they hit upon the truth, later corroborated, typical of a writer, who usually sees beyond appearances, and imagines, rather than reasons, what lies beneath the surface of facts and things. Eureka is a long and complexly arduous task of explaining the origin of the universe and the substance that forms it. Poe himself establishes from the beginning the view on which his words are based: "Intuition. It is only the conviction that arises from those deductions or inductions whose processes are so obscure that they escape our consciousness." The author strives to establish scientific theories that justify, and on which his thoughts are based. The unity of the whole is the basis of the universe, it breaks up into particles, forming the various worlds of the universe. But the same force that has dispersed them tends to reunite them sooner or later towards absolute unity. And what is this unity? Nothingness, or God. The conclusion is positivist, it tells us of a reasoned God, a God founded on a process that is born in observation and is created from the reasoning that it gives rise to. As many of these studies, for example those of Maeterlinck, are condemned to suffer the weight of scientific truth corroborated by the advance of technology, but what the interested reader seeks is not irrefutable truths, but the beauty that is born from his imagination, even if it is based on and tries to justify itself with scientific theories. The result is a poem in prose, as Poe himself declares from the beginning of his study.

León Felipe

Broken Anthology (1947)

The anthology contains texts selected by the author himself from his books of poems published between 1920 and 1927. There are, then, 27 years of poetic production and ten books. The whole, it seems to me, is enough to have a fairly approximate idea of the author and his style. The first two books show us an austere, sensitive poet, concerned with musicality in short, simple and forceful verses at the same time. The first, from 1920, published in Madrid, has as its main theme the author himself, his

relationship with poetry and with the world. He constantly speaks of the loneliness of man, the fleeting nature, and the use of the image of the wind as an instrument that devours man and his life, in the manner of time and its passage, is already evident. The verses are not only correct, but because of their very simplicity they move in a direct way, with clear images that are adjusted to a wise balance between literary pretension and evident popular intention. The second book, from 1929, written in New York, shows a similar quality, although not a step forward. The theme here is God and divinity, the relationship of God with man, his cruelty and coldness, his apparent indifference towards the creature he has created in his image. Then, the rest of the anthologized books are invaded by political references: Franco and the war. They all revolve around the same thing, and even if they move away from the subject, the language has become corrupted by idioms and vain and tendentious rhetoric. Except for three poems from the book *The Damned Poet*, from 1944, especially *The Emperor of Lizards*, where despite the obvious unsubtle symbolism we find a great poet, the rest stand out for their mediocrity and the obvious loss in the paths of rhetoric and the use of poetry as a means of ideological expression. Much has been said about this, poetry is not an instrument to express a truth, and moral intention is never enough to create a poem. Poe, in his essay on Longfellow, makes it very clear. And we could cite many other examples, the closest being that of Rafael Alberti, another Spaniard afflicted by the same evil, in our opinion. The problem is not to question positions or literary talent, much less to judge eras or to take a position on this or that side, but to make clear something that is evident to any good reader, and obviously to any writer committed to language in the first place: politics is never a good subject for poetry. There are exceptions, valid to a certain extent, such as Vallejo, or other authors where politics is subtly masked by rigorous language, of high poetic quality, and where the theme is only a means to dig into deeper places, such as nature and the human condition in general.

Edgar Allan Poe

Essays and reviews - Eureka

Poe as a critic is almost as great as Poe the storyteller. I say almost because his genius as a narrator is above any of his other qualities as a writer, however excellent they may be. Having made this clear, let us comment on the collected essays and reviews. We begin with the essay where Poe analyzes the construction of his poem *The Raven*. It has been said of this essay that it is too cold and schematic, and that if the construction of the poem had been like this step by step, it would not have

the quality that it really has. That is to say, Poe seems to have left aside the intuitive, deep motivations of the theme and its form. It is limited to a schematic logical explanation of why he chose such a theme and the ways to express it, which is equivalent to listing the ingredients and the process. The analysis is absolutely valid and very interesting. It shows us a Poe unknown to those who are only accustomed to his horror stories. Poe was a scholar and a huge reader, a great critic and a very important thinker of literature. Perhaps that is what is surprising at first, to see that the author of so many horrors was more than a simple storyteller. His immediacy as a narrator had made him one of us, we had identified with him, despite the spatial and temporal distance of his stories. Seeing him now as a critic of his own work and of the literature of his century is surprising but ultimately gratifying. Why? Because it tells us about the complexity that a text must have, the underground current of meaning. Because it tells us about the unity that every literary work must have. Because it tells us that perseverance is one thing and genius is quite another. He speaks to us of poetry not as a transmitter of truth, but of beauty. He thus establishes and establishes a whole position that continues to be discussed, on the function of art in general and on poetry in particular. Another discovery is when he speaks of the criticism *io*. The intrinsic beauty of his theory is born from the talent of his pen, and this is the main objective. If it later coincides with the truth, it is a privilege and a welcome gift.

José Ingenieros

The mediocre man (1913)

This essay by Ingenieros surprises by the lucidity and sharpness of vision, the audacity in supporting certain ideas, and by the language adopted for an essay of this type. It is not an investigative study, but a set of ideas and impressions organized by chapters, in which he develops certain aspects about humanity in general and about man in particular, especially about contemporary man. But the analysis he makes applies to man in general, of all times and places, since it tells us about the moral and social characteristics of humanity. On the one hand, the content of the essay shows a lucid, observant, analytical look at both the word and its most appropriate meaning, which leads us to the means he uses to express his ideas. The language, then, becomes poetic, with a cultured and ambitious style, almost baroque at times, with certain modernist twists, which will then tend to disappear not long after. This more refined style can also be found in Eduardo Mallea, which is not a coincidence, since he is another Argentinean extremely concerned about both the culture and the destiny of his country. And here we must speak of homeland and not nation, a



difference that Ingenieros is responsible for highlighting in one of the chapters of this book. Because with the excuse of speaking to us about the mediocre man, he leads us to analyze the factors and elements that form, determine and are the object and plaything of this type of man. As we said, the concern for words and their meanings leads him to make constant distinctions between concepts and definitions, descriptively developing the characteristics of what he tries to capture. For example, he does not make a distinction between the mediocre man and the honest man, comparing them in terms of morality and hypocrisy. As an antithesis, he speaks to us about the honest man, giving us the word virtue as a similarity. With this example alone we see the audacity in going against the conventionalisms that tend to vulgarize ideas in general and remove or deform the correct meaning of words. Like this, there are many examples where his sharp mind relates the decadence of nations with the decline of morality and indifference for artists and men of true talent. His idea about natural selection applied to contemporary man can be misinterpreted with a superficial reading, since he speaks to us of the survival of the best, he even says that poverty or idiocy are necessary to highlight the contrast of high values. But Ingenieros speaks to us of moral values and not economic ones, of honesty as an example of virtue, of the saint, the hero and the genius as the only examples to follow. He also warns that although these are too high examples, they are the ones we should impose on ourselves to imitate, since anyone can copy the mediocre. Another of the crucial ideas, which is out of tune with what is currently considered politically correct, that is, with what is conventional and conservative, is when he talks about old age as a time of mediocrity and decline, both physically and intellectually and morally. Physical and neurological weakness also perverts intellectual values, and therefore moral values. His point of view, as we have already said, is purely abstract, but it is still based on tremendous logic based on the fact that both moral and intellectual values go hand in hand with physical values. He tells us, for example: "Maturity softens the wicked, making them useless for evil." A healthy mind in a healthy body, he would say, I would dare to say. Ingenieros' vision is that of a doctor, therefore the physiological is in direct relation to both moral and physical logic. Finally, he gives us the example of Sarmiento and Ameghino, two men who imposed their ideas on different levels of knowledge and reality. Both fought against the mediocrity of their contemporaries. They were artists of their sciences and political and intellectual skills, and they imposed, in short, a morality based on their principles and beliefs. They went beyond their individualities but defended them at the same time as someone who uses a weapon. At another point he tells us: "Genius has never been an official institution."

This essay, then, is an icon in Argentine literature, a study that is at the same time a strong intellectual blow to the prevailing mediocrity and mediocrity, to the conformists and the decidedly hypocritical, a call to awaken the indifferent and a recognition to the worthy. "When one lives fed up with coarse appetites and no one thinks that in the song of a poet or the

reflection of a philosopher there may be a particle of common glory, the  
tion is abysmal." This is, then, an essay brimming with brilliant and highly  
human concepts and ideas, transmitted in a language that is in keeping  
with the level of what it deals with: the poetic language to speak of man.

New Times (1920)

This book contains lectures and dissertations written from 1914 to 1920. The subject that provoked them is the First World War and its consequences on the political map of the world, but above all the appearance of the Russian Revolution. In the first two essays, especially in the one entitled Old Ideals and New Ideals, Ingenieros demonstrates the human and intelligent outlook to which we are accustomed. He is even less intransigent than usual and expands on paragraphs worthy of the best poetic prose, with a humanism bordering on the quasi-emotional. The following essays are dedicated to analyzing the situation in Russia with the new policy brought by the Revolution. The great problem is the treatment he makes of this analysis. What in his other books is a critical and scientific view of the subject matter, here slowly but inexorably becomes a partial position, which does not hide his affinity for socialism and the new miracles that occurred in Russia as a result of the Soviet revolution. It is true that bad opinions, many of them malicious and false, predominated in the world media about what was happening there, largely as anti-communist propaganda, but Ingenieros limits himself to copying fragments or complete articles about supposedly true reports about the social changes that occurred in Russia. The question is not whether one version is real and not the other, or vice versa, but that the expected critical lucidity of Ingenieros is conspicuous by its absence. The language is skillful and effective, the articles appear to be as serious and meticulous as ever, but the lack of critical depth is notable, of that commendable and rich doubt that feeds his sociological writings. To all this we must add the obvious inconsistencies that time has shown us later: the crimes that occurred in Soviet Russia, the lack of freedoms, the repression, the imprisonments, the corruption, the economic crises. Then, behind these great social achievements that dazzled the world, as they did with Ingenieros, everything has collapsed, leaving room for the final triumph of capitalism, the same that communism wanted to oppose in order to balance the lack of social and economic justice in the world. Soviet socialism created its own death with the corruption that was born from its very cradle. Everything good, everything great, carries within it the seed of its death. And this is what Ingenieros apparently did not see or did not want to see, like so many others in his time, blinded by the light of hope that the revolution made glimpse endlessly and without limits of greatness. Little by little, the five articles devoted to different facets of Soviet politics: economic, educational, political, moral, are taking on a more partial character, disqualifying

capitalism with words that are far from the usual analytical accuracy of Ingenieros. It is true that he is not doing science, not even sociology, he is giving opinions, and as a man given to all lack of hypocrisy, he does not keep quiet, above all because he says things with intelligence and lucidity. I repeat, his position is understandable: he is a man dazzled by the information that came from Russia, by the ideal characteristics of socialism that he studied with diligence, a man who also, after the initial dazzlement, has thought and reflected on the new hope that was born, and reached the conclusion that this hope had a firm foundation and a real possibility of realization.

But time gave way to many disappointments, to changes that nobody expected at that time, and that is why these essays have suffered the passage of time. They have aged not only because time has disproved their assertions, but also because of the author's lack of distance. Every partial position suffers this setback, sooner or later, and it is to be assumed that Ingenieros knew this. Even so, he risked writing with the skill of a man of science but with the blinded eyes of a politician. We wonder if what we now read in his pages was necessary and seems to us to be exaggerated praise, of exacerbated enthusiasm for the Revolution. But the author was too close to events, too close to be able to see clearly even the edge of the future. What he was not wrong about was seeing in the Russian Revolution an inevitable, necessary change, something that broke the ravages that the old world dragged along in its decadence. What came after, good or bad, also aged later because of its own ambition and corruption. History is a circle that repeats itself in various ways and in various places, to a greater or lesser extent, creating a spiral that gives an inequitable feeling.

English: The University of the Future (1914-1924)

Here is a collection of essays on a variety of topics, which allow us to get to know Ingenieros beyond his position as a sociologist. In *The University of the Future* he speaks to us in his role as a pedagogue and educator, about his concern for the University of his time and the growth and development of the objectives of the State University. He proposes a theory: that the Faculty of Philosophy should be an organization that coordinates general ideas that exceed the limits of the other faculties. The objective is to give a humanistic and general vision to university education, whatever the discipline. His conclusions are lucid, concrete and progressive. *The Story of a Library* is almost an anecdote about the economic and political difficulties of publishing a series of works on culture and philosophy, giving current readers concrete indications that cultural projects have never been a priority in the plans of any government. After investing out of his own pocket to make the project a reality, he tells us: "I have decided to lose as an editor what I have earned in ten years of practicing medicine. Just in case, I will not stop practicing medicine." In *Le Dantec*, biologist and philosopher, he gives us an account and commentary on the works and

importance of this thinker in the evolution of the history of biological sciences. The study is detailed and shows his admiration, without falling into false flattery. At the same time, it serves to make clear his own principle on scientific study: "...either one seeks the truth and accepts its legitimate consequences, or one rejects outright any truth that may imply consequences repudiated in advance." He says this in reference to the difficulties that Le Dantec had in reconciling his hypotheses with the religious ideas in vogue. The genius of a researcher is not always based on his discoveries, but on the courage to make them known. The article on Kant is brief but concrete and accurate about his virtues and flaws, and serves to raise questions as eternal as those that forced Poe to write *Eureka*: the relationships and limits between philosophy and metaphysics. The essays on Croce and Gentile highlight Ingenieros' virtue as a polemicist and lover of truth. He criticizes both for having made concessions in their philosophical positions, specifically on the characteristics of the so-called idealist, atheist school, towards the Italian state, specifically the secular positivism that predominated in the period prior to and simultaneously with Mussolini. This fragment is perhaps the most important of these collected articles. In *The New Sciences and Old Laws* he speaks to us about the practical incompatibility of applying the new discoveries, especially the research on criminal responsibility and psychological states during crimes and misdeeds, to the legal and penal system prevailing at that time. The result of doing so is what was easily seen at that time and can be seen today frequently and in alarming numbers: the acquittal or release of dangerous criminals under the title of non-responsibility. The last essay is a tribute to his teacher José Ramos Mejía, fluctuating in a healthy balance between admiration, affection and fair and critical analysis, through which he brings us closer to the human and professional profile of his teacher. In short, here we find a less rigid Ingenieros, if we can put it that way, in relation to his other studies that speak of sociology and scientific criticism. We find an intellectual concerned with the concrete problems of society: education and laws, with a scientist interested in the origins and evolution of science and thought, with a professional capable of feeling deep affection for a teacher and a friend.

### Argentine Sociology (1918)

This book by Ingenieros is a collection of essays of different origins and calibres, all of them related to the study of sociology. It brings together texts from the late 1800s to 1914 and 1915. Despite the long lapse between them, we see that Ingenieros' stance and lucidity has remained firm, even affirmed, maturing from a position learned in his student years towards a more comprehensive thought adapted to the situation of his country. His is a thoughtful stance, based on multiple readings, both scientific and

humanistic. As we have already said on the occasion of another review, he defends the Darwinian school applied to various disciplines, including sociology. Already in the first part, where he makes a recount of the history of sociology in Argentina, he is in charge of speaking and defining its object and instrument of study as "biological sociology." For him, the essential question of the development of peoples is the economy, and this is a direct consequence of the development of the peoples. The Spanish, in turn, are not only a consequence of the moral foundation of both cultures at the time of the conquest, but also of the climate and the resources that benefited or harmed their settlement in America. The Spanish, in decline, did not adapt to the climate of South America, and they mixed with the Indians, creating a more adaptable but less intellectually developed mixed race. The English found a more temperate climate, managed to survive on their own and did not mix with the native inhabitants. From there, European culture, which Ingenieros calls superior, developed a more intelligent, more organized and stable civilization in the north. That is why the development of North American democracy is an example for the rest of America. One may or may not agree with this theory, one may call it racist at first glance, even discriminatory, but the position is exclusively rational and scientific, based on facts and direct contact with the indigenous people, a privilege that we lack. Nor is it a new theory, Sarmiento had already put it forward many times before. His is not a need to apply a theory to every aspect of the world, but the enormous plasticity of certain facts to adapt so placidly to certain theories. The evolutionary theory was so strong at the time that it did nothing but divide the world into two irreconcilable sides. Those who accepted it found in it a satisfactory explanation for almost all aspects of the world: human nature and its conflictive relationship with the environment found ways out and ways of reconciliation based on a common foundation: the struggle for survival. This position is undoubtedly arbitrary, cruel in many ways, mercilessly logical but extremely rational, so much so that it deserves to be the highest idea of human thought. Another aspect to highlight is his position regarding fiction literature. In some paragraphs we find that he criticizes some books, for example by Echeverría, for condescending to literary resources close to fiction when he talks about sociology. He criticizes the pseudo-literary aspect of the treatment, but it is not a criticism of literature itself. His discomfort comes from the insufficient scientific development of the subject. This aspect is important to highlight, because Ingenieros himself has developed essays where a certain poetry of morality adapts perfectly to a greater literary language, even poetic in certain fragments, for example in *El hombre mediocre*. The second part of the book is dedicated to the criticism of five books on Argentine sociology by Ramos Mejía, Juan A. García, Bunge, Ayarragaray, etc. Here we find sections admirable for the absolute simplicity of their logic: "The feelings and wills of men only make history in appearance: in reality they are molded and transformed by the action of the environment." Phrases like this one determine the controversy from the beginning, but they are still terribly logical and revealing. That is why the evolutionary

theory influenced Ingenieros in such a way. He, like many others, found poetic beauty in a scientific idea. Whether in the theories of Newton, Einstein or Kant, we wonder if they do not come from the same places as literary fictions or art in general, that is, from pure imagination. There will then be no place for the differentiation between scientific and literary imagination other than their object of study: reality or fiction. There will be no struggle, because both are instruments of man. His comments on these books are of immense lucidity and great critical capacity. For Ingenieros, these books, with their shortcomings and their achievements, have proposed scientific criticism as their goal, and it is to this that he devotes his intellect. His opinions are intertwined with those of the authors commented on, creating a kind of discursive ping-pong that makes the book being criticized grow and increases the critic's skill. The first paragraph, which deals with Ayarragaray's book and his study of anarchy and caudillismo, establishes his position: "When criticism is simple gloss, slow rumination or agile commentary on the brain work of others, without the currents themselves contributing to the widening of the channel, it only occupies a low rung on the scale of intellectuality." A high and risky point is his critical commentary on the new labor law project presented by Joaquín V. González. Here his duty is doubly risky, not only does he adopt a position regarding a contemporary project, but he also dares to make a detailed study of each of its articles. The fifth part of the book is devoted to the study of the formation of an Argentine race, that is, the new population that has been produced as a result of the various European immigrations. He makes a statistical study of the country's population from its beginnings until his time, 1900. He comes to the conclusion that a new physical and intellectual nourishment was necessary to get out of the mediocrity into which the population had sunk. The European immigrants created a new white population that slowly grew and expanded from the port of Buenos Aires. For Ingenieros, as for Sarmiento and many others, it was necessary to feed the blood of the country's population with new signs of intellectual progress. The mixture obtained with the mestizos, mulattos and indigenous people had created a strange amalgam where the caudillos and the profiteers found an appropriate field for anarchy and political disorganization. Without a doubt, history proved them right, but it has also shown us that history repeats itself in periods, and as Ingenieros himself said in another fragment of this same book: "In the scientific conception of History, each social phenomenon is a product determined by multiple environmental conditions." The periods of revolution and social peace, of democratic and de facto governments, of poverty and economic progress, have been happening in a way that only confirms the original theory that we mentioned before: a country in North America where democracy has never succumbed, against multiple countries in South America where even in the 21st century we continue to play at being caudillos.

Simulation in the struggle for life (1900)

We have already commented on the multiple intelligence of Ingenieros on the occasion of *The mediocre man*. If there we found ourselves with a mature writer, whose language knew how to express in a very particular way his peculiar and critical thoughts on morality applied scientifically, in the essay that we are commenting on today we find ourselves in front of a recently graduated doctor, very young, but no less lucid and intelligent for that. His language is perhaps less mature, but of the highest quality, his outlook is evidently less expert but certainly bold and daring in stating his position, his way of thinking. This, which has not changed much over the years, has a position based on observing the world with a scientific and critical eye, always suspicious, even cruel, one could say, for those who are not accustomed or sensitive to hearing truths whose verification is overwhelmingly simple. Here, Ingenieros speaks to us of simulation as a psychic element that man uses to survive. He makes a clear and methodical distinction between the different forms of simulation, from the natural and spontaneous, almost unconscious, to the voluntary and pathological. He tells us that every man simulates, every man lies, either to not differentiate himself from the majority and not be relegated, or to obtain a specific goal or objective. His study is analytical and methodical, it is clear and profound at the same time. We must adapt to Ingenieros' position in order to fully understand him, so that his conclusions and critical sense do not provoke outbursts of rebellion in prejudiced souls or narrow minds. Because that is what we are as readers, we carry prejudices and taboos in the same way that we carry the germ of simulation in our genes. We are animals, and that is why our way of surviving has advanced from pure physical violence to a more subtle, more elaborate, even crueler form of survival: lying and simulation. Ingenieros is a Darwinist, he applies what is called social biology, and so his comments may seem racist or, at the very least, contemptuous, to the narrow and poorly read mind of the generation of the 21st century, the daughter of another generation no less narrow-minded, that of the "politically correct." What is commendable about Ingenieros, in my opinion, is the boldness without puns of his position and his discourse, of his view, mistaken or not, but sincere with his medical intuition. This is what he does when he analyses social behaviour, that of the private man and his relationship with his fellow men. He observes how a scientist who knows that he cannot distance himself from the object of his study, and therefore does not worry about the distance or the non-contamination of the object analysed, but as one more, is severe and understanding at the same time. More than with the individual, he is severe with society, which tends to annul the individuality of the being in order to achieve common uniformity. As when he tells us that fraud, the last and most elaborate form of simulation, has the sanction of use in social customs.

Almost everything in human relations is simulation, and above all in politics, where vested interests are hidden under the label of ideals or poetic justice. It is thus that he considers certain aspects of anti-Semitism.

or wars for honour as ways of disguising economic interests. Even, both in the individual and social aspect, the interest in the sick or solidarity would be based on the idea that what we have done for others will be returned to us later. The distinction he makes between simulation and dissimulation is very interesting and necessary, both apparently contrary but with the same result. We simulate what we want to be, we dissimulate what we do not want to be: the result is to show something that we are not. Ingenieros does not ignore the function of art, which despite being recognised as the supreme action of pretense, in reality has a self-awareness of that pretense, and therefore is no longer such. For this reason, he tells us that the most brilliant manifestations of art are empirical studies of human character. As for the individual, he makes a Darwinian classification of the same, something that he would later develop in *The Mediocre Man*: there are weak men, naturally predisposed to simulation in order to survive, and men of character, firm in their position, even if they do not agree with the thoughts or feelings of the majority. This represents a dichotomy, a contradiction. Those who have character must be too strong to face the rejection of others, and generally succumb; those with little character, on the other hand, develop simulation instincts, which make them suitable for survival. That is why society, in its desire for uniformity, generates its own decadence: it encourages fraud as a methodology of life.

Another controversial topic, although not developed in this long essay, is that of eugenics. Here too, Ingenieros' position could be classified as cruel and racist, even merciless, contradictory for a humanist like him. However, this theory is in agreement with Darwinian theory, and if we call the latter cruel, then we must postulate that nature itself is cruel, and that men, as part of it, are also cruel by nature. And if we were to place ourselves in the opposite position, that is, the Christian one par excellence, where man was made in the likeness of God and removed from all animal influence, it implies another type of racist cruelty, towards inferior beings, criminals and the sick, who are allowed to live but are removed or locked up. The evolutionary theory has, in exchange for its apparent cruelty, converted into a virtue by its content of scientifically proven truth, the implicit idea that men and animals have had common ancestors, and the beings called inferior, intelligent or idiotic, evil or kind, are our brothers in the species, and therefore we are responsible for them as for ourselves. The end of the essay reaches conclusions in perspective of the future quite far from the reality of the twentieth century. Engineers says that in human societies the struggle for life will be progressively attenuated as the association of the struggle against nature increases. As we, active protagonists of the second half of the twentieth century, have seen, the struggle for life has crudely intensified between peoples, nations and individuals, both due to economic and political factors; the forms of simulation have reached levels of complexity that the author perhaps would never have imagined; physical cruelty has not disappeared; and the struggle against nature, with the simple object of human survival, has led us to a degree of extreme danger for the very survival of the life that we intended to defend and protect.



Dan Simmons

### The Fires of Eden (1994)

This novel by Dan Simmons has in most of its pages the virtues that characterize, if not the best of the author, then his narrative skill and talent. In his narrative, Simmons has the peculiar virtue of mixing good literature under the guise of a particular genre, be it horror, fantasy, science fiction or pure fiction, and it is not unusual to find a mixture of genres in the same novel. His plots are not entirely original, since he uses other literary sources as food, without hiding these sources; on the contrary, he uses them as narrative material and as the plot axis in many cases. In *The Fires of Eden* the source is the legends of Hawaii, the magical history of the aboriginal tribes. Everything seems to go well during the almost four hundred pages of the novel. We have an appropriate language, fluid but which does not fall into clichés or bad taste, a plot and a conflict that are not original but well carried out, with a mystery and an intrigue that grows and is revealed little by little. We find ourselves in a hotel where unexplained disappearances have occurred, whose owner tries to sell it while facing supernatural events. In turn, we have a university professor who visits the complex with the diary of an ancestor who He lived on the island, and whose presence is not well explained. As a third axis, the diary itself. The problem, postponed for many pages, and abusing the reader's trust, is when we reach the end. The resolution is absolutely trivial and even ridiculous. The confrontation of the ancient forces of evil, released by the contemporary inhabitants of the island, is crude and literarily meaningless, too fast, like a dessert prepared without enthusiasm. And here, thanks to this great defect, is where the other flaws of the novel are revealed, accumulated throughout it, but which had been hidden by the desires of an intrigued reader and the author's craft. The usual division of plots to which Simmons has accustomed us, and which tend to intermingle at the end, here becomes simplistic and rhetorical. The reasons for the conflicts are also forced and unjustified. The conjectures, usually limited, tending to direct the reader's attention and logic rather than to explain a mystery, acquire an invalid, unjustified meaning. The economic motivations that trigger the conflict and the revenge of the ancestral forces are trite and crude as a literary motivation. The characters lack contrasts, despite appearing to be well defined, but their construction is revealed as superficial at the end of the novel, schematic and without emotional or psychological depth. It is true that the central motive of this kind of stories is the primordial sense of adventure and mystery, entertainment as the narrative axis. However, it is a great cause of disappointment for a reader interested in exploring new worlds, interested in looking for something in a

book that, even if it represents his daily life, involves him emotionally and astonishes him in some way. For this, the author needs an appropriate language, and above all, one that aims at high heights. Simmons has shown in other texts that he knows how to move in a peculiar way, made up of a strange mix of genres and a language of apparent simplicity but which hides curious grammatical resources, twists and a crudeness not devoid of nostalgia. These virtues are missing in this novel, a consequence, perhaps, of the main flaw that seems to underlie it: the superficial objective of applying a structure, the Hawaiian legends, adorning it with a trivial plot and a weak and trite conflict. What worked very well in other novels, does not here, and the cause is not only the nature of the material used as inspiration, but the author's own lack of inspiration on this occasion.

### A dark summer (1991)

Summer of night, such is the original title of this novel. Here Simmons ventures into terror, creating what seems, at first, a Stephen King variant. Very close in time to the novel *It* by this last author, it shares with it several similarities: a group of children protagonists who face the forces of evil in a small town in the northeastern part of the United States. So far the similarities, but the development and style go in other directions. In this text we find a typical Simmons language, that mix of good literature that seems to be ashamed of showing itself as such, hiding in a style that tends to become simplistic and commercial, but that never manages to be so, at least in the good novels and stories of this author. I remember having read for the first time one of his stories, which, through research, turned out to be the first story published by Simmons and for which he won a very important award. That story is called *The River Styx Goes Upstream*, and there we can find something that characterizes the best of the novel we are now dealing with. The key element in this Simmons current is the disturbing, bittersweet and bitter mix of nostalgia with the macabre. The dark, the terror itself, are shaped by the hands of anguish, an anguish that comes from a moderate desperation and the unbreakable feeling of what is lost forever, of what is unrecoverable, of nothingness and of the darkness that surrounds us and awaits us. One and the other factors feed off each other, to give a broad spectrum whose result is a kind of tale to be read on a night by a fireplace, in the silence and warmth that allow us to glimpse, however, strange noises and a slight chill perhaps imagined.

We have a school whose old building hides strange forces that only research into the past can explain. The children who are the protagonists of the novel each have their own defined personality, their family traumas, their fears and their virtues. The psychological depth is not too deeply excavated, but it is enough for the facts and factors that trigger their actions to explain themselves. It is a long novel, often lengthened by scenes

that we could consider They may be dispensable in order to gain intensity and emotion, but even so, Simmons' narrative skill is evident in knowing how to keep the reader's attention with fragments of high literature, a literature that knows how to express itself not so much in a fine or elegant language, nor even with a very high poetic flight, but with a curious symbiosis between the necessary good taste and the subtlety to enter with scalpel hands in certain recesses of strange places. Unlike King, who in his good novels knows how to develop psychology as an allegory of ancestral and external elements or forces, Simmons works mystery and horror with an ambiguity that represents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he keeps the reader in suspense until the end, allowing multiple explanations that make the reader build his own path of logic through the pages. On the other hand, this ambiguity runs the risk of being shown with insufficient force and intensity, being effective in many cases. As in the story mentioned above, the gaze of childhood is paramount, and the contrast between the innocence of childhood and pure evil is an extremely interesting and rich mixture that the author explores in a formal but no less effective way. If what is needed is good language, he knows how and when to do it properly, even though he sometimes fails, like every prolific author. The peculiar mixture of anguish and desperate terror with the vision of a child creates an extra sensation of horror, as if the already terrible thing were increased in its gravity by the characteristics of the victim on whom he has set his sights. But this evil is hardly personified and we do have the sensations and the life of these children, whose vision runs the wide spectrum between naivety and supreme pain.

Ilion (2003)

Simmons' fondness for using literature as a source and nourishment for his own work is well known. If in *Hyperion* the shadow of Keats reigned, in *Ilion* it is Homer with his *Iliad*, as the basis of the plot and the episodic story, but Shakespeare and Proust also appear, as reflective echoes, or Browning, through one of his characters. As in other novels, there are several plot axes that alternate in the successive chapters, and they are differentiated not only by the characters, time and place, but also by the chosen language, recalling through these styles, the cited authors, and creating a back and forth between fiction (previous literature) and reality (literature or work that is currently being developed). Therefore, we find ourselves within a network of fiction within fiction, but at the same time ancient fiction is a chronicle of a real event, the Trojan War, and this historical reality is used as fiction for a futuristic work. So, the author resorts to these two great genres: history and literature, and at the same time mixes them with scientific resources that study time. Time is, consequently, the great hinge that allows this novel to become a reality.

The Trojan War is corroborated and studied on its own battlefield by a university professor who witnesses it in real time after traveling from the future 20th century. But these warriors and gods possess technology that does not match the historical period in question. At the same time, we have beings half human-half robot whose mission is the destruction of the city (future destroying the past, fiction-reality destroying reality-fiction?), and as a third sector, a group of humans who want to understand their origins. Thus, we see that the gods are post-human, something that anyone who has read the Iliad would have no objection to. Homer's work itself is no longer just a work of fiction for our current eyes saturated with rationalization and scientism, but also of the fantasy genre. This mixture, or rediscovery, that Simmons makes of implicit but not always obvious associations at first glance is curious and commendable. The story is captured in an epic poem created with a futuristic story whose foundation is intended to be a real fact, populated by fantastic episodes that are not evident, but based on explainable and logical scientific facts and procedures. Literature is used as a legend, which produces a renewal and serves as food for science fiction, and as a critical analysis of the present, and more precisely as a condition and projection of the future of man according to his present tendencies.

But the criticism is not about the social or the moralizing. The instrument and the result is pure entertainment. However, as in the best Bradbury, there is an allegory that underlies the argument, a tendency to study the human soul through its intellectual, scientific and technological actions. Unlike Bradbury, Simmons does not have a precisely poetic language, but a style that is a strange amalgam of grammatical crosses that are not entirely obvious but understandable to the palate of a trained reader, good literature and an apparent simplicity in the use and search for style. It is crude but restrained, it can be rude but does not reach bad taste. Its imagination, without a doubt, is astonishing. In this novel, not only the authors mentioned are important, but also the characters taken from literary fiction. For example, Caliban, or Prospero, products of the imagination, take on real flesh as products of human technology. The virtual creates realities, Simmons tells us, so why can't literary characters also be realities? The spheres of the virtual recreate both gods and monsters.

The philosophical background of the novel is the game of time, the uncertainty, flexibility and unreality of time. Space as an indeterminate consequence. The gods, therefore, are conceived as entities created by the imagination, literary characters and humans at the same time. Man is his own God, this novel seems to lead us to think. And if so, why the constant struggle with the gods, the rebellion against the creator fathers and their arbitrary desires and acts? The ending finds us at the very beginning of the war between gods and men. The plot of the epic poem has gone astray: the games of time have done their will. Is time God, does time exist?

